From the New York Times bestselling author

### Five Night at Freddy

### TALES FROM PIZZAPLEX

#2 HAPPS AND #3 CLEITHROPHOBIA



SCOTT CAWTHON



THERE'S SOMETHING CREEPY ABOUT THE WAY HE SMILES ALL THE TIME." DREW HUFFED.

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SMILES ALL THE TIME. DREW Hor Ed.

Liam followed his friend's gaze. Drew was watching their boss, Mr. Burton, the nice old guy who owned ing their boss, Mr. Burton, the nice old guy who owned part-time.

Justa Pizza where Liam and Drew worked part-time.

Drew glared at Mr. Burton as he slapped his mop

Drew glared at Mr. Burton as a line of the property of the floor. The cleaning solution's lemony scent against the floor. The cleaning solution's lemony scent stung Liam's nostrils as he watched Drew take out his discontent on Justa Pizza's black-and-white herringbone floor tiles. His customary scowl was carving deeper-than-usual grooves between his thick black eyebrows.

Liam shook his head as he finished putting the last of the wooden chairs upside down on the dining room's round, scarred oak tables. It was a half hour past closing. Mr. Burton was tallying up the day's receipts at a table in the back corner of the burgundy-walled room, hunched over his old-fashioned calculator—one with thick buttons and a narrow strip of paper that printed everything entered into the machine. As Drew had noted, Mr. Burton wore a peaceful smile, and he was whistling a perky tune that kept time with the clicks and whirs of the calculator.

"There's nothing wrong with being cheerful," Liam said, jumping back to avoid getting splashed by Drew's AY HE haphazard mopping.

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Drew grumbled. "It's not natural."

Liam sighed and walked away from his friend, heading toward the back of the dining room. There were still dishes to be done in the kitchen. Drew was supposed to have finished them earlier, but he'd gotten caught up on texting his girlfriend, who was obsessing over what color tux he should rent for prom.

If Drew hadn't been texting, though, he still wouldn't have been working. At least two or three times a week. Liam would find Drew scribbling in his notebook or even sitting in the break room typing on his laptop. Mr. Burton was beyond patient with Drew. He usually just made a tsk sound when he caught Drew writing instead of working. Sometimes, he'd say, in a teasing tone, "I'm going to have to dock your pay, my boy, if you keep that up on my time." But Mr. Burton never followed through on the threat.

"We had a good day today, Liam, my boy," Mr. Burton said as Liam passed by. "A good, good day." With

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TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX a flourish, Mr. Burton punched one final button on the a flourish, Mr. Burton rabbed a flourish, Mr. Burton rubbed calculator. The paper spit farther out. Mr. Burton rubbed

his bristly square chin and nodded in satisfaction.

At B "Liam grinned at the old s bristly square and grinned at the old guy and found "Great, Mr. B." Liam grinned at the old guy and found "Great, Mr. D. and found when Mr. Burton picked up his himself whistling along when Mr. Burton picked up his himself whistling along when Mr. Burton picked up his himself whistling are his boss a thumbs-up, and Mr. B tune again. He gave his boss a thumbs-up, and Mr. B returned it enthusiastically.

Short and stooped, with wispy white hair that never Short and stoop stoop and tended to get wilder as the day went on, Mr. Burton was kind of a funny-looking old guy. As wild as Burton was kind as his brows were even more chaotic; the brow his hair was, his hairs were long and often stuck straight out like woolly ledges above Mr. Burton's big blue, slightly rheumy eyes. His features were thick and rubbery. In addition to the prominent nose, he had full lips and puffy cheeks. His ears were huge, so much so that his lobes flapped when he moved his head quickly. Like many elderly men, Mr. Burton had a bowling ball-size paunch that hung over the waistband of his low-slung black slacks. Burgundy suspenders—always burgundy, no matter what color striped shirt he wore-held up the pants. Without the suspenders, the pants would have easily slid past Mr. Burton's flat butt and skinny legs to puddle above the black-and-white oxford shoes he favored, always kept polished to a high sheen.

Liam brushed past a trailing ivy plant that cascaded down from the top of an antique maple hutch near the back of the restaurant. One of Liam's regular tasks was to keep all the houseplants fertilized and watered. Mr. Burton loved his plants . . . and his antiques. Liam also polished the old furniture that was stuffed into the dining room. The hutch was just one of many ancient cabinets

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y r looked more like the inside of a nineteenth-century looked than a restaurant. Drew complained about all mansion that had to be maintained, but Liam thought it was cool. Justa Pizza was unique.

Liam pushed through the swinging door to the pizzeria's kitchen, which still smelled of browning crust and bubbling pizza sauce. He sighed. The kitchen was a mess. Drew, as usual, had been slacking off.

Liam dove into putting the kitchen to rights. There was no point in getting upset about the extra work. Drew was Drew, and that was that.

When they were little, Drew and Liam had lived next door to each other, and they'd been inseparable. Building tree forts, carving extensive roadways into the mud in their backyards for their toy cars, collecting bugs and leaves and rocks, washing down peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with glasses of cold milk—they'd done everything together.

Liam started working his way through the mountain of pans and dishes as he rolled his shoulders to release the tension his memories had created. It wasn't those specific memories, actually, that bunched his muscles. It was what had come later.

Just after Drew and Liam had started middle school, their together-all-the-time era ended when Liam's parents sold the two-story farmhouse next door to Drew's family's massive three-story Victorian. Whereas Drew's dad was in management at the local tool manufacturing plant (the biggest employer in the small town), Liam's dad worked on the assembly lines. Over the years, his poker games with his friends and his questionable investments

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in "business opportunities" had eaten up most of his in "business opported and Liam's mom's teaching of his not-too-great salary, and Liam's mom's teaching salary not-too-great salary, couldn't make up the difference. Liam had learned more couldn't make up the difference. Liam had learned more when L than he wanted to know about foreclosure when he was than he wanted to he and his parents had moved into a twelve. After that, he and his parents had moved into a double-wide manufactured home at the edge of town. Liam and Drew continued to hang out together even

Liam and his parents took their ride on the financial downslide. But for the last four years, the friendship had been subjected to increasing strain.

Liam picked up the last dish that needed washing as Drew stomped into the kitchen. He glanced over his shoulder at his friend as he scrubbed the dish clean.

"Can you believe it?" Drew kicked the mop bucket ahead of him into the corner of the kitchen. "Now he wants us to deep clean the main oven, like move it and degrease under it and crap. Says it hasn't been done often enough."

Liam looked over at the battered stainless-steel oven. Mr. B was right. It had been here for decades, since Mr. Burton had first opened the restaurant, and was looking pretty grungy.

"He says we'll all do it together." Drew curled his thin upper lip. "It'll be fun," he mimicked Mr. Burton's rumbly singsong voice.

Before Liam could respond, Mr. Burton pushed into the kitchen. "I thought since tonight isn't a school night, it would be a good night to get this old thing spiffed up." Mr. Burton gestured at the oven. "With three of us having a go at it, we should have it done in no time."

"Sure thing, Mr. B," Liam said. He didn't mind staying late. What did he have to go home to anyway? Besides, aten up most of his om's teaching salary in had learned more losure when he was had moved into a seedge of town. Out together even the financial he friendship had

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shed into ool night, g spiffed ree of us ne." staying Besides, he could use the extra money. Mr. B always paid them time and a half after 1 a.m., even though he didn't have to. And, as usual, he always helped them with the work. He was a good boss, more than fair.

Not that Drew thought so.

That was the crux of the growing problem between Liam and Drew. In the past few years, Drew had become

A couple years before, Drew's grandfather had passed away. The man had made a fortune in the import/export business, and he left that fortune to his nine grandkids. Drew's share, after all the estate taxes, was over \$750,000, but to Drew's chagrin, the money wasn't his outright. His grandfather had placed the money in a trust fund that would be in Drew's dad's control until Drew turned thirty. The same applied to the other kids, too. They were cool with it. Drew wasn't.

Everything was an affront to Drew. No matter how well someone might treat him, he always saw what a person didn't do instead of what they did. When Drew's mother bought him clothes and cleaned his room, she was "smothering him." When Drew's dad put money into Drew's college fund instead of buying Drew a new truck or paying for his cell phone bill, his dad was "being a jerk."

"Dude's got enough money to take Mom on a trip to Tahiti for their anniversary, and he won't buy me a new truck? What's up with that?" Drew had been repeating this grouse ad nauseum for weeks.

Liam would have traded his parents for Drew's any day. Drew's parents were attentive. Even though they both worked full-time, their main focus was on Drew and his sister, Carly. Drew and Carly were *loved*. Liam's

parents were too caught up in their own problems to care hout him. He supposed they loved him, but it. They mostly parents were too caught by loved him, but he much about him. He supposed they loved him, but he much about him. They mostly ignored the much about him. The about it. They mostly ignored him wasn't entirely sure about in own for a long time wasn't entirely sure and on his own for a long time, even He'd been pretty much on his same roof.

though they all slept under the same roof. ough they all siept the whole new truck/Tahiti thing. Liam's main mode of transportation was still his bicycle. Only on rare occasions was he able to borrow his mother's Only on rare occurs when he really needed a cat. old beater, and the other hand, had his own car. Drew's parents Drew, on the out of the parents of the parents of the parents had given him a looks-like-new ten-year-old SUV a year had given him a looks-like-new ten-year-old SUV a year before, on his sixteenth birthday. It was a nice vehicle. It before, on his said before long bed that Drew wanted.

Whenever Drew brought up the truck lately, Liam wanted to use his dad's old line: "Quit your complaining or I'll give you something to complain about." Those words had been often accompanied by a blow. Liam's dad, a passive-aggressive wuss in public, took out his frustrations on his wife and son. Not that anyone knew that. Not even Drew. Liam had never told the truth about his occasional black eye or swollen jaw.

It was after 2 a.m. when Liam and Drew stepped out into the alley behind the pizzeria. Liam inhaled the cool night air, wrinkling his nose when the smell of rotting produce wafted over from the nearby dumpster. Heading toward his bike, which was chained to a post a few feet from the door, Liam glanced up at the stars. The black sky was full of them. For some reason, the stars always made Liam feel a little better about everything in his life. They the gr Th the fa restal

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reminded him that all his problems were mere specks in the grand scheme of things.

the grand sent The only immediate sound was The town was quiet. The only immediate sound was the faint buzz of the old lighted Justa Pizza sign above the restaurant's back door. In the distance, a cat howled.

Sometimes, on late nights like this, Liam felt like the little town existed in its own reality, separate from the rest of the world. Everything felt so insulated here.

Liam and his family had moved here when he was a toddler, so he didn't remember anywhere else. He watched TV, though. He knew what normal towns looked like. This one never felt normal to him. The place kind of reminded Liam of a collection of movie sets. Everything seemed strangely fake. One neighborhood was filled with nineteenth-century homes. One was all mid-century modern. One was a gridwork of manufactured homes. The factory, with its red brick exterior, looked straight out of the 1800s, but the factory's offices, all flashy steel and glass, were almost futuristic. The two schools in the town-elementary and middle school/high schoolreminded Liam of children's blocks; they were formed from prefab compartments linked together. All the businesses in the small downtown district were blocky, too. Each shop was a different color; all were two-story with living quarters above, and all had flat roofs. The shops marched along Main Street in a disconcertingly straight line in front of the diagonal parking spaces that lined the sidewalk.

Liam had seen pictures of other small towns, places he thought looked inviting. This town wasn't inviting. In spite of the community's attempts to "spruce up" TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX the three-block-long, two-traffic-light business district the three-block-long, the modern art sculptures placed along with multicolored, modern looked weirdly inhospital with multicolored, most looked weirdly inhospitable the sidewalk, the area still looked weirdly inhospitable the sidewalk, the area think much about it, but he never Liam didn't like to think much about it, but he never Liam didn't like to the He planned to leave as soon as really felt settled here. He planned to leave as soon as

Instead of striding toward his SUV, which was parked next to Mr. Burton's panel van near the pizzeria's back entrance, Drew stood still and jangled his keys. "You entrance, Diew there's no way we can pay for prom know," he said, "there's no way we can pay for prom with what we get paid here."

Liam was well aware. Liam's girlfriend, Shauna, wanted a "special" night for their senior prom. She expected him to spring for an expensive dinner out, and of course he had to rent a tux and get her a corsage. On top of that, there was the travel expense. He at first thought he'd just have to come up with gas money for the long drive to the prom's after-party-he'd planned to borrow his mom's car for that. But then Shauna decided she wanted to go to the party "in style." Liam and Drew were supposed to split the cost of a limo for the night. Liam had been trying to talk Shauna out of the limo, but so far she wasn't budging. He was going to have to dip into the savings he'd been working at amassing. He'd planned on using that savings to buy his own car. Prom was going to push that dream further away.

"We could always take on a second job," Liam said as he unlocked his bike.

Drew snorted. "I barely have time for this one. What with Rianne and the paper."

Liam didn't comment. Drew was the editor-in-chief and main writer for their school's paper. He liked to call

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himself an investigative journalist. His latest series had himself an investigative in the school lunches. He been on chemical additives in the school lunches. He admittedly spent a lot of time on the paper, but he didn't admittedly spent a for Rianne, Drew's girlfriend, he didn't spend have to. And as for Rianne, Drew's girlfriend, he didn't spend that much time with her. Drew treated her as more of a decoration for his arm than as a real girlfriend.

Drew jingled his keys louder and kicked a pebble, which pinged off the dumpster's green metal. "It's the principle of the thing," he said. "That old troll makes plenty of money. He could pay us more. He's just like my dad. Tight. Thinks just because he's older, he should get all the money. Treats us young guys like servants. It's not right."

"Maybe not," Liam said. "But it's normal. Everyone has to start someplace. Generally, the bottom. The only way to make sure we're the ones with money someday is to work hard."

Drew blew a raspberry. "Now you sound like my dad. That's bull. Why should you have to work hard for money when there's plenty to go around?"

Liam straightened his bike and prepared to get on it.

He was too tired for this. He'd already decided he'd take on some extra odd jobs—mowing lawns, washing cars, cleaning windows—to pay for all the prom expenses. He'd asked Mr. Burton for more hours, but the old guy had regretfully said that it wouldn't be fair to the other employees to give Liam a larger share of the hours. Mr. Burton had eight other employees. Two of them were cooks. The other six were like Liam and Drew—their duties ranged from serving tables to delivering pizzas to washing dishes to general cleaning. Liam understood Mr. Burton's reasoning. There were only so many hours

to go around. The pizzeria was usually busy, but it was small, and it could generate only so much revenue.

Small, and it could generate only so much revenue.

Drew snapped his fingers. Liam blinked and frow ned

at him.

"I've got it," Drew said. "I'm going to write an "I've got it," Drew said. No, wait. I'll write one on exposé on low-paying jobs. No, wait. I'll write one on Mr. Burton." Drew narrowed his eyes and looked over Mr. Burton. "I've never trusted the man. That toward the pizzeria. "I've never trusted the man. That toward the pizzeria. Han going on has to be some whole jolly-old-elf thing he has going on has to be some whole jolly-old-elf thing he has going all the time."

Liam raised an eyebrow and studied his friend. Drew,
Liam raised an eyebrow and studied his friend. Drew,
Liam supposed, was a good-looking guy... at least that's
what girls seemed to think. Tall and lean, Drew wasn't
what girls seemed to think long legs and torso gave him the
exactly athletic, but his long legs and torso gave him the
look of a long-distance runner. Or maybe a rock star...
at least when he wasn't dressed in Justa Pizza's employee
"uniform" of crisp white shirt, black pants, and burgundy
cotton apron. With longish black hair, brooding brown
eyes, and features Shauna had once described as "sultry"
(Liam had decided not to be jealous about that), Drew
reminded Liam of one of those hippieish-looking guys
who recited poems on open mic nights.

Drew couldn't have looked more different from Liam. Liam had gotten his looks from his mom and her "mostly Irish" family. His auburn hair was curly, and his facial features were more on the cute and cuddly side than the sultry side; his fair skin was freckled. Liam had spent most of his high school years waiting for a growth spurt that thus far hadn't come. He'd gotten to five feet eight inches but that was where he seemed to be sticking. He made the most of his height, though. He was on the school's wrestling team, and his lean-muscled physique reflected

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That might not how if only he could get some facial hair. That might how if only he him look more like the adult he was trying to grow help him look more like the adult he was trying to grow

into.
When did you decide 'happy' was a bad thing to be?"
Liam asked Drew.

Drew laughed without a trace of humor. "It's not bad.

It's just not real. Happy is an illusion. Or at least it will be until we get out from under the thumb of the man."

Liam laughed out loud. "The man?' Did we time-travel to the sixties, and I missed it?" He shook his head and got on his bike. "I need to go home and get some sleep. I promised Mrs. Gomez I'd weed her vegetable patch in the morning." He looked at his old, cracked watch. "I mean, today. It will be light in just a few hours."

Drew punched Liam lightly on the bicep. "Better you than me. I'm going to go sleep until Mom drags me out of bed for Sunday brunch."

It was late Sunday evening before Drew finally got to settle down in front of his computer to write his story. Drew settled on the rumpled gray sheets knotted up on his queensize bed, popped open a can of soda, put in his earphones, and cranked up some grunge rock. He'd left his parents and his sister all cozied up on the sofa in the family room; they were going to watch some feel-good rom-com. Carly had suggested he invite Rianne over to join them (Carly, who had just turned thirteen, looked up to Rianne in an embarrassingly fawning way). Drew explained he had work to do, and he was rewarded by his dad's approving grin. His mom had made some comment about wondering how he

could work in the pigsty of his room. He'd given her a hug,

and her complaint had melted away. Now. Drew had to admit his room was starting to Now, Drew had to all the odors of sweaty, dirty clothes and smell a little rank—the odors of sweaty, dirty clothes and smell a little rank—the forgetting to throw away smell a little rank—une forgetting to throw away take, spoiling food (he kept forgetting to throw away take, spoiling food junk-food packaging) weren't all spoiling food (ne ker take) spoiling food (ne ker take) weren't all that out containers and junk-food packaging) weren't all that out containers and January and January and that that compatible. But whatever. He was a writer, not a cleaner, compatible. But whatever. He was a writer, not a cleaner. comparible. But what cleaner, a cleaner, life wanted to be the kind of award-winning investigative life wanted to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended to be intended to be, he'd have to learn to wanted to be intended If he wanted to be the intended to be, he'd have to learn to write in journalist he intended to smelly bedroom was not in journalist he intered, smelly bedroom was probably any setting. His cluttered, smelly bedroom was probably any setting. His the squalor he'd be writing in over the coming the least of the squalor he'd be writing in over the coming the least of the square after and found the story that would years when he went after and found the story that would would would make him a bestselling writer. He planned to go from the school paper to a national paper, and from there, he was going to become a serious book author. He was going to be an influencer. People were going to hang on his every

Drew shoved a pillow behind his back and flexed his fingers. Ever since he and Liam had left the pizzeria early that morning, he'd been turning over ideas about how to write the exposé on Mr. Burton. He'd gone to sleep chewing on several story hooks, and when he got up, he was still mulling over various angles. As if his article series was divinely ordained, Drew got further inspiration from the drive to his parents' country club, where the family had mandatory Sunday brunch every week. The drive always passed a farm on the outskirts of town; it belonged to a strange old man who had a billboard at the edge of his property. The crock expressed his frequently bizarre views on the billboard, many of which were on the theme of the downfall of mankind. Today's message had read 1 DECEPTION The bi better disg smiling ol Drew was a lite demons reasoned example What i public 1 employ That v his fin

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The billboard got Drew's creative juices flowing. What better disguise for a demon than a seemingly benign, perpetually smiling old guy who sells pizzas?

Drew had to admit that he didn't think Mr. Burton Drew had to admit that he didn't think Mr. Burton was a literal demon. Not the kind with horns anyway. But demons must have minions who do their dirty work, Drew demons must have minions who do their dirty work, Drew demons must have minions who do their dirty work, Drew demons must have minions who do their dirty work, Drew demons must have minions and a demon or a demon's helper. What if Mr. Burton was a psychopath? Mr. Burton's kind public persona in contrast to the miserly way he handled his employees was certainly suspect, if not outright demonic. That was Drew's hook. Grinning, he began to type as fast as his fingers would go.

In less than an hour, Drew was reading over what he thought was his best article ever. Some of the lines were just plain brilliant. Like this one: "In an age that places a spotlight on hypocrisy, vilifying big pharma that kills cuddly animals in pursuit of the all-mighty dollar and boycotting goods manufactured in overseas sweatshops, how is it that we are willing to accept this same kind of duplicity in our own town?"

Drew found parallels between demonic subterfuge and the inconsistency in the service industry's aims. "How can a business that claims to be serving the community undermine that very community with unfairly low wages?" Drew wrote. He went on to discuss the egregious unfairness of requiring employees to buy their own work clothes. "Mr. Burton requires his employees to wear white button-front shirts. Cotton only. White is the color of cleanliness, he tells us. It doesn't matter that

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TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX we work around pizzas and keeping grease and tomato work around pizzas almost impossible. We're expected sauce off our clothes is almost them clean. The only the we won our clothes is and keep them clean. The only thing to buy the clothes and keep the Justa Pizza burgundy approvides is the Justa Pizza burgundy approvides in the Pizza burgundy approv to buy the clothes and the Justa Pizza burgundy aprons.

Mr. Burton provides is the Justa Pizza burgundy aprons. Mr. Burton provides is to his low-paid employees.

He's passing off his expenses to his low-paid employees.

He's passing of a nice man?" The gist of Drew's He's passing off his expense?" The gist of Drew's Point is that the act of a nice man? The gist of Drew's Point Is that the act of a file who acted like they had everyone's was that nice old guys who acted like they had everyone's best interests at heart couldn't at the same time pay best interests at he pay their employees pathetically low wages and treat their their employees pathetically low wages and treat their employees unfairly.

Before Drew latched on to the whole demonic angle, Before Diew and angle, he'd planned on doing some research to see what kind of he'd planned on Mr. Burton. Once he got his big idea, though, he didn't bother with research. Who cared? If Mr. Burton was a fake, his past would be fake, too. Drew might as well take creative license and provide Mr.

Burton with a past that fit his unfair practices. Drew ended his article with a call to action: "If you

are a consumer with integrity, if you like to make wise and conscientious financial choices, you can do only one thing about two-faced men like Mr. Burton. Let Mr. Burton know that you won't stand for his treatment of his poor, beleaguered employees. If Mr. Burton refuses to raise his wages, he deserves nothing less than to relinquish his claim to your business. No good pay for Justa Pizza's employees; no business for Justa Pizza's owner. It should be that simple. I encourage you all to take the action you have the power to take. Mr. Burton doesn't deserve your support if he doesn't support his employees."

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Wednesday afternoon, the latest school paper came wednesday aid, Drew made sure Liam got a copy. As he always did, Drew made sure Liam got a copy. As he always did, Drew made sure Liam over lunch. He'd thrust his latest effort in front of Liam over lunch. He'd thrust his late

Liam was so ashamed of what Drew had written that he was more than a little reluctant to go to work that afternoon. They lived in a little town and the school paper was read by more than just the students at their school. The town itself had a small weekly paper, but under Drew's direction, the school paper came out three days a week. Go figure. Drew might have been the laziest, most entitled person Liam knew, but Drew still worked his butt off for something that didn't even pay. Liam had to admire Drew's passion; Liam had yet to find something that lit him up the way journalism lit up Drew.

Because of the paper's popularity, Liam knew that someone would have brought the article to Mr. Burton's attention. And if people had actually done what Drew asked them to do . . . Liam cringed at the very thought.

When he walked into the back of Justa Pizza, Liam could tell that Drew's article had indeed made an impact. The kitchen, usually hopping this time of day, was still and silent. Only Rob, one of the cooks, was walking around the long, narrow stainless steel-filled space. And he was walking slowly.

Liam froze in the doorway as he stared at the too-cally Liam froze in the door. He felt partly responsible kitchen. As Drew's best friend, he felt partly responsible kitchen. As Drew's best in the couldn't bring himself to for what Drew had done. He couldn't bring himself to

Rob, a short, balding, thirtysomething guy, frowned enter the restaurant. Rob, a short, balding, where's that yahoo friend of yours?" he

The friend in question shoved past Liam. Liam nearly

The friend in the Thick finger at Drew "Vou arrive." Rob pointed a thick finger at Drew. "You, Can you say shoot yourself in the foot?"

"What?" Drew blinked and looked around as if

genuinely baffled.

Liam finally came all the way into the restaurant. He ducked into the tiny employee's room off the kitchen. The room contained a small cherry dining table, six ladderback chairs, and a sideboard that held a microwave and a coffee maker. A narrow bookshelf—that had been rescued from an old Carnegie library, Mr. Burton had said-sat against the cream-and-burgundy-striped wallpaper that covered the room's walls. Liam dropped his backpack on the bottom shelf. Two purses and another backpack were already on a couple other shelves.

Liam went out into the kitchen. Just as he did, Mr. Burton came through the swinging door leading to the dining room. Deb and Tracy, two of the other employees, trailed behind him.

The kitchen's lighting wasn't as good as it should have been. Orders were often mixed up, and ingredients were frequently confused because some of the original lighting had stopped working and Mr. Burton hadn't had it fixed. Because of this, the kitchen was a collection of shadows and b room. one c then Lian artic

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Then Mr. Burton pushed his glasses down his nose.

Over the top of them, he peered at Liam and Drew. And he smiled. The smile might have been a little strained, maybe a lot strained, but it wasn't an evil smile. It was just an ordinary old man's smile.

Liam thought Mr. Burton looked hurt. His eyes were more watery than usual.

Liam immediately felt like an idiot for letting Drew's imagery influence how he saw kind old Mr. Burton. "Hey, Mr. B," Liam said lightly, as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on.

Mr. Burton attempted to match Liam's levity. "Hello, my boy, hello, hello," he said. The joviality in his voice was a tad fake. And the chuckle that came after the greeting was more so. Mr. Burton was obviously forcing himself to be a good sport.

"So, it seems we have some discontent in the ranks," Mr. Burton said. He didn't look at Drew at all. He took off his glasses and used the tail of his yellow-and-white-striped shirt to clean the lenses.

Mr. Burton looked around at his employees. No one said anything.

Deb, short and petite, tugged at one of her honeyblonde curls as she looked sideways at Tracy. Tracy

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TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

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apron. Tracy was a solid wouldn't have wanted to get built like a linebacker. Liam wouldn't even notice built like a linebacker. however, didn't even notice the on her bad side. Drew, however her long brown to the lark eyes narrowed under her long brown to on her bad side. Drew, on her long brown bangs way her dark eyes narrowed under her long brown bangs

when she looked at him. Drew just smirked. His gaze drilled into Mr. Burton,

Drew Just Shirt. Burt as if he was challenging the old guy to confront him, "I've never thought of myself as a miser," Mr. Burton said. "And surely, I don't intend to pinch pennies. I apologize if that is what you all think I've been doing."

Tracy immediately stepped over to Mr. Burton. She towered over him as she put her powerful arm around his narrow shoulders. "That's not what we think." She flashed another dark look at Drew. "At least that's not what most of us think."

Deb nodded vigorously. "You've always been more than fair to me," she said to Mr. Burton.

Mr. Burton reached out and patted Deb's arm. "Thank you, my dear. That's very kind. Even so." He cleared his throat. "I've decided to give you all, across the board, a dollar-per-hour raise. I've already contacted the others who aren't here and let them know. The raise will be reflected on your next paycheck."

No one said anything at first. Then Tracy and Deb both hugged Mr. Burton and thanked him. Rob clapped Mr. Burton on the back and shook his hand. Liam mumbled an awkward thank-you. Drew smirked some more and remained silent.

Rob turned and speared Drew with a long stare. "Maybe you should use that poison pen of yours to retract MONSTER

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business to cover the raises Mr. Burton just gave us all."

Drew still remained silent. He just tied on an apron

and walked out of the kitchen.

Thankfully, business picked up as the afternoon went on. Not everyone in town had seen the article, obviously. They had enough customers to keep them busy until

By then, Liam had convinced himself that the aftermath of Drew's article would be short-lived. As Liam lost himself in the normal closing chores, some of the tension he'd felt since he'd read Drew's article had begun to recede. Liam was even whistling when he started to pull the mop bucket into the men's restroom. His whistle caught in his throat, however, the second he spotted Mr. Burton standing at the white sink opposite the restroom's two urinals and one enclosed stall.

Hunched over the sink, Mr. Burton was washing his hands. This, in and of itself, wasn't noteworthy; Mr. Burton washed his hands a lot. It wasn't Mr. Burton's over-and-under, hand-over-hand motion or the soap frothing over his knuckles that froze Liam to the spot. What turned Liam to stone and sucked the breath from his lungs was the bright red blood that splashed against the sink's stark-white porcelain surface. Liam swallowed hard as he watched blood-pinked soap dripping from Mr. Burton's wrists.

Mr. Burton raised his head. He looked into the mirror, and his eyes narrowed. He spotted Liam in the mirror's reflection. He turned.

Liam dropped the mop he was holding. It clattered to the floor as Liam's gaze was caught in Mr. Burton's stare.

# TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

Mr. Burton's pupils were black pinpricks in the middle of

Mr. Burton's pupils as hard as a flash-frozen lake.

blue irises that looked as hard as a flash-frozen lake. he irises that looked time seemed to stop. Liam could For a few seconds, time seemed to stop. Liam could

hear his heart pounding in his ears. Then Mr. Burton turned back to the sink. "I'll be Then Mr. Burton done in two shakes of a lamb's tail," he said. He held done in two snakes water flowing from the tap, and he his hands under the water over the sink, rinsing and he his hands under the water over the sink, rinsing away the began splashing the water over the sink, rinsing away the began splashing the blood stains. Mr. Burton made no mention of the blood, and Liam was too unsettled to ask about it.

Liam bent over to pick up the mop. By the time it was back in his grip, Mr. Burton had wiped his hands and was heading toward the restroom's door. As he passed Liam, he said, "I'll get out of your hair."

Mr. Burton patted Liam's shoulder. Liam stiffened and didn't move for a full minute after Mr. Burton let the restroom door swing shut behind him.

Even though they worked together every evening the rest of the week, Liam and Drew didn't talk much. They only shared two classes at school, and for the remainder of the week, Liam spent his lunch hour working out instead of eating. Truth be told, he was avoiding his friend. He hadn't gotten over his embarrassment. Drew-who definitely didn't need the money-had strong-armed poor Mr. Burton. Liam felt awful about it.

On Saturday, however, Liam had to spend time with Drew. The two of them had been paired up in their history class. They were supposed to put together a presentation on some aspect of Celtic folklore for a history fair coming up in just a few weeks. They figured they co Justa Pi Liam increas of scho had or awkw slumn every

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they could get a lot done before their evening shift at

Justa Pizza.

Liam and Drew's get-togethers were becoming increasingly rare. When they did see each other outside of school, they always met up at Drew's house. Drew had only been in Liam's new home twice and it had felt awkward in the extreme. Drew made it seem like he was slumming, and Liam felt like he had to apologize for every cheap thing in the place.

It was a sunny afternoon, so Liam and Drew set up laptops at the outdoor table on the back deck. Drew's mom had a green thumb and the yard was lush. The thick green lawn was perfectly even and free of weeds; it was surrounded by planting beds filled with flowers in every conceivable color. Liam knew nothing about flowers, so he didn't know the names of the profusion of blooms that he could see around them. All he knew was they were pretty and they smelled sweet. So did the freshly mowed grass.

Saturday-afternoon neighborhood sounds wafted into the yard from beyond the cedar fence that enclosed it. Liam could hear the even rhythm of a bouncing ball out in the street, the screams of little kids combined with the spurt of a sprinkler in the house next door, and a dog barking a few doors down. Closer to the deck, intermittent chirping came from a clump of bushes at the edge of the lawn. Liam looked over and saw a handful of sparrows hopping about in the beauty bark under the bushes.

Liam inhaled all the yard's amazing scents. "Can you imagine living in nature inside buildings like we all do now?" he waved at a nearby bush.

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TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX Drew grinned and pointed a finger at Liam, "You

Ding to be a writer now.

Not hardly. You know I'm better with

Liam laughed. "Not words." going to be a writer now?"

numbers than I am with words."

Drew nodded. "That's true." Drew nodded. The focused. "But I have been Liam tried to get them focused. "But I have been

doing some reading, and-", "I've been reading, too," Drew interrupted. "And I've

come up with an angle." He opened his laptop. Liam was only a little annoyed at the interruption; he Was used to it. He watched Drew's face as Drew tapped was used to it. The his keys and then turned his laptop so Liam could see the screen.

"I think we should do our presentation on kelpies," Drew said.

"Kelpies?"

"Yeah," Drew said. "They were Scottish shape-shifters that could turn into animals, and-"

"I know what kelpies are. Like I said, I've been reading. But that seems a little out there for our project. We should—"

"I've been looking into shape-shifting," Drew interrupted again. "Humans taking other forms. Or other beings taking human form. Werewolves. Stuff like that."

Liam frowned at Drew. Before he could form a question, Drew went on.

"It's Mr. Burton," Drew said. "I think he might be something besides the man he pretends to be. He might have powers."

Drew's words were so surprising that Liam leaned

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back, as if the words themselves had plowed into him and shoved him away from the table.

Liam attempted a chuckle. "Good one. But I thought you got what you wanted. He gave us a raise."

Drew made a face. "I'm not joking." He abruptly stood and started pacing back and forth on the redwood decking. Drew's feet pounded the boards and Liam felt the vibration ripple up his legs.

"All he did was give us a tiny raise," Drew said. "You noticed he didn't even mention what I said about having to buy our own clothes for work."

"That's because they're not uniforms," Liam said.
"They're regular white shirts and black pants. We can wear them anywhere. Why should he buy them?"

Drew stopped and frowned at Liam. "Are you serious?

Do you think I'd buy white button-down shirts and black slacks if I didn't have to have them for work?"

Drew had a point. He was a jeans-and-T-shirt guy. Liam actually didn't wear his black slacks outside of work, either. But he wore the shirts. He couldn't have done that if they were uniform shirts.

"Besides," Drew went on, "ever since we got the raise, nothing's gone right." He blew out air. "Did I tell you I got a D on the physics test?"

Liam shook his head, wondering how Mr. Burton and the raise could have anything to do with Drew's grades. He didn't ask the question, though. He was afraid to. Drew was stomping back and forth, his face reddening with each step.

"I got a D in calculus, too," Drew said.

Liam remained silent. He wasn't surprised by the

TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

grades. Drew was lazy. He did as little as possible to get by And some classes required more than that.

"Then there's Rianne," Drew said.

"What about her?" Liam asked.

"She dumped like double-dating to the prom."
"I thought we were double-dating to the prom." "I thought we we're still on for that. I'm taking Cecilia now."
"Oh, we're still on for that. I'm said. Cecilia

"Oh, we're still on are," Liam said. Cecilia was one of "Of course you are," Liam said. Drew do d. "Of course you the class. How did Drew do that, Liam the pretriest girls in the class. How did Drew do that, Liam

wondered. "That doesn't sound so bad." "And Dad's on my case, big time," Drew continued.

"And Dad's "Liam didn't really care, but maybe if Drew got it all out of his system, they could get on with their work.

"One of my tires blew the other night. I lost control

and took out the old biddy's mailbox."

"The old biddy," Liam knew, was the widow who lived at the end of the street. Liam thought she was nice. Drew couldn't get past the fact that she'd called the police one day when he'd sped through the neighborhood and narrowly missed her cat.

"When Mom and Dad gave me the SUV, Dad said I had to take care of the insurance," Drew continued. "It cost a lot, so I got the highest deductibles you can get. But now, the damage is less than the deductible. So, I have to pay for all of it myself. I don't have that much, so I asked Dad to help. He won't do it. He says I need to learn responsibility."

Liam agreed. He didn't say so.

"We had a big fight," Drew went on. "I told him I don't have time to work more in a job because of the work for the paper, and he said my priorities are screwed up. He says I'm have to there w until I money on Me won't

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I I It t. says I'm going to be a starving reporter. I told him I didn't have to starve if he'd let me have my trust fund. He said have to starve if he'd let me have my trust fund in his control there was a reason Gramps left the trust fund in his control until I turned thirty. I accused him of wanting to steal the until I turned the fund. He got so pissed that he took it out money from the fund. He got so pissed that he took it out on Mom and Carly, too. Now they're mad at me. Mom on Mom and Carly, too, Now they're mad at me. Mom won't do my laundry. Carly keeps playing her stupid pop music at full volume. I can't concentrate to write."

Poor Drew can't touch his inherited hundreds of thousands until he's the decrepit age of thirty. So sad.

Liam gave some thought to pretending to play a little violin. He decided not to. Instead, he said, "What does all this have to do with Mr. Burton? And shape-shifters?"

Drew threw up his hands. "Isn't it obvious?"

Liam slowly shook his head.

"He's sowing unrest," Drew said. "That's what demons do. It's what skinwalkers do."

"And shape-shifters? I thought werewolves just liked to rip people up. What do they care about unrest?" Liam asked, fully aware of how stupid the whole conversation was.

"You're missing the point!" Drew shouted.

Liam frowned. He crossed his arms. "What is the point?" he asked quietly.

Drew leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I've been reading about unsolved crimes, you know, victims of psychopathic serial killers who haven't been caught. And it has me wondering just what Mr. Burton really is."

Liam shook his head.

Drew ignored him and went on, "Mr. Burton thinks he can appease me with his little raise. As if a dollar an hour can make everything okay. It's a drop in the bucket.

Who can get ahead on a dollar-an-hour raise? IBOYCOTT JAZWAR what it is."

"What's evil?"

Drew suddenly sat back down and pulled his chair over next to Liam's. He leaned in so close that Liam could smell Drew's breath—it reeked of the onions they'd put on the sandwiches they'd eaten before they came outside to work on the project.

"Evil is subterfuge," Drew said. "Wrong pretending to

be right. Bad disguised as good."

Drew tapped his chin, and Liam saw that Drew's cuticles were chewed raw. He also suddenly noticed the dark circles under Drew's eyes.

"Okay," Liam said for lack of anything better to say.

Drew backed up and pointed at his laptop. "I just started thinking about how there's so much in the world that we can't see. So many things going on right in front of us that are invisible." He waved his hands. "Cell phone signals. Radio waves. Microscopic bacteria and viruses." Drew pointed at the computer. "Did you know scientists find about eighteen thousand new species of plants and animals a year? Every year!" He slapped the tabletop. and the soda cans they'd set next to their computers jumped. Fizzy soda splashed onto the table's white resin surface.

Liam was having trouble following Drew's logic. He waited to see if it would come together. And it did, sort of.

"With all that unknown stuff in the world," Drew said, "who's to say some of the people we think are people aren't actually people at all?"

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"I mean what if people like Mr. Burton, all the niceynicers out there who want everyone to think they're so normal and so good, are actually something else."

Liam decided he had to get the train back on the tracks. "Okay," he said. "We can go with shape-shifters. It'll be unique. I'm sure no one else will go that route." He opened his own laptop. "How do you want to do this?"

Drew's face, which had been taut and flushed with passion, went slack. The red faded from his cheeks. He picked up his soda and took a sip. Then he said, "Well, let's do it the usual way. You research. I write."

Liam nodded. And then it was like Drew's rant had never happened. They began knocking around ideas about how to approach their presentation while the sparrows continued to chirp in the bushes.

For the next few days, things seemed to return to normal. Justa Pizza's business picked up again. Liam and Drew worked their usual shifts. Liam was grateful for the bit of extra money he got from the raise . . . it wasn't enough to cover all the expenses he had upcoming, but it was something. Drew continued to gripe about working for low pay, but that was Drew. Liam didn't think much about it . . . until Drew's next article came out.

"What good is \$20?" was the headline of Drew's next article. Explaining that part-time workers don't get many hours each week, Drew examined the tax and social security deductions taken from wages, and concluded that the extra twenty-four dollars he got each week after Mr. Burton's raise amounted to just twenty dollars net

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Liam cocked his head and leaned it toward the door. He heard nothing. Not a single sound.

Liam shook his head, inwardly scolding himself for being nosy. He was just letting Drew's attitude about Mr. being get to him. He shifted the tray he held and strode Burton get to him kitchen away toward the kitchen.

Mr. Burton didn't come out of his office until just before Liam and Drew were getting ready to leave the restaurant. As they were heading toward the back door, Mr. Burton appeared suddenly, so suddenly that Liam gasped audibly.

Embarrassed by his reaction, Liam gave Mr. Burton a sheepish grin. "Hey, Mr. B," he said. "We're taking off."

Mr. Burton gave Liam a curt nod. He didn't speak. Liam thought Mr. Burton looked awful; he seemed to be shriveling up right before Liam's eyes.

Drew opened the pizzeria's back door, and Mr. Burton's gaze shifted to watch him. As soon as Mr. Burton focused on Drew, Mr. Burton's face tightened. For just an instant, Mr. Burton's friendly eyes went cold. A muscle below his left eye twitched . . . once. And then Mr. Burton wiped his face and turned away.

Liam ignored the shiver that rippled down his spine. He'd never seen Mr. Burton show anger like that. Seeing the frosty, barely contained ire under Mr. Burton's usual sweet expression was like looking at the real face behind a mask. It was unnerving. Liam forced himself to shake off his uneasiness as he followed Drew out of the building.

From that point on, the headlines got worse and worse:

"Mr. Burton Cuts Corners."

"Pizza Profits or Personal Respect?"

per week. "That's eighty lousy bucks per month," Drew per week. "That's elegation of the country, service industry workers wrote. "All over the country, service industry workers wrote. "All over the country, service industry workers wrote." wrote. "All over the wrote, and they're supposed to be are treated like peasants, and they're supposed to be grateful when they receive more crumbs than usual Does a benevolent smile and a pair of flashy suspenders

make up for that kind of parsimony?"

Liam was sure Drew was particularly proud of that last line. He was also probably pretty pleased with himself line. He was also I minself about the headline of his next article, too. It was splashed about the headline read Darston!" the headline read Darston!" see you, Mr. Burton!" the headline read. Drew really worked to rile up his audience in that article: "We need to make sure Mr. Burton knows that we know the truth. Everyone. Let him know: 'We see the truth, Mr. Burton. You can't smile your way out of your cruelty."

The evening that article was published, Liam didn't see Drew much. When Liam was out front in the dining room, Drew was in the back, either in the kitchen or in the storeroom. And when Liam was in the back, Drew was out front. A couple times, Liam couldn't find Drew at all. That was when Mr. Burton was locked in his office.

Not long before closing, Liam was rushing past Mr. Burton's office carrying a tray of dirty dishes, and something made him stop at the closed door. He paused near the doorjamb and listened.

Liam had never thought much about the fact that Mr. Burton often retreated to his office and locked the door. The man had a right to privacy. But now, after Drew's articles and the weirdness in the restroom, Liam wondered what Mr. Burton was doing that required a locked door.

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### TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

"Justa Pizza or Justa Rip-off?"

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Burton's pizzas. He leveled fond

Burton's pizzas. He leveled fond Drew started with pizzas. He leveled food safety used in Mr. Button used in spector to the pizzeria, but Justa Pizza passed inspection easily.

That was when Liam confronted his friend. "What's That was when they left wrong with you?" Liam snapped at Drew when they left wrong with you? I liam snapped at Drew when they left the restaurant near midnight in the middle of the week. the restaurant hear week. Why'd wou know Mr. Burton runs a clean place. Why'd you write what you wrote?"

Drew gave Liam a condescending look of pity as if Drew gave Drew gave to young and naïve to understand the nuances of the subject. "It's called accountability," Drew said. "The only way to draw out the enemy is to put him under pressure."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Drew glanced up at the moonlit sky. "Werewolves are triggered by the full moon. Serial killers are triggered by an inner urge or something from their past. Mr. Burton has a trigger, too. I'm going to find out what it is. I'm going to be his full moon."

Liam's mouth dropped open as Drew sauntered toward his SUV. One of the SUV's headlights was busted and the front fender was dented. Clearly, Drew hadn't come up with the money to get repairs done.

Drew also had yet another girlfriend. Cecilia had already cut and run. A lovely redhead named Zoey was now going to be Drew's prom date. If she lasted that long.

Liam could barely stomach reading Drew's exposé series. Although calling it an exposé was like calling a burger haute cuisine. The articles were nothing but a smear campaign, but because Drew was the head of the paper, r fact, pe "MI Burton

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paper, no one was calling him on what he was doing. In fact, people were starting to get into it.

Burton's Past Revealed: Child Died in Mr. Burton's Last Restaurant" was the headline for an article that reported Mr. Burton, under a different name, covered up the death of a child.

"Mr. Burton Gets Away With Assault!" was the headline that accused Mr. Burton of attacking an unnamed employee who claimed the old man slapped her after her shift.

It was this last article that triggered the protests.

Up until the assault accusation, the impact of Drew's articles hadn't been catastrophic. Yes, there had been a steady deterioration of customers at Justa Pizza. However, a relatively well-traveled scenic route ran through town and Justa Pizza continued to get tourist trade. Mr. Burton was now relying on that business to stay afloat.

The protests, however, took away those customers, too. "I don't understand," Mr. Burton said late on a Friday afternoon as he peered around from behind a vintage bronze-and-cherry coatrack near the big picture window at the front of the pizzeria. Mr. Burton's usual smile had been replaced with a confused purse of the lips and puzzled frown. It made Liam want to hug the old guy and offer to get him a cup of tea.

Liam was polishing a nearby sideboard. He'd just polished it the day before, but there wasn't anything else to do today.

Rob and Tracy were in the back taking an unnecessary inventory. Deb had already gone home. She'd claimed she had a doctor's appointment, but Liam was pretty sure she

## TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

left so Mr. Burton wouldn't have to pay her-or ask her

leave.

Liam understood Mr. Burton's bafflement. He looked

Liam understood window and shook his head at out through the picture window and shook his head at the spectacle unfolding in front of the pizzeria.

Outside, several dozen people were marching back outside, severall carried professionally printed Justa Pizza. They all carried professionally printed protest

signs.

There were three different signs: MORALS BEFORE MONEY; MR. BURTON, GO AWAY; and BOYCOTT JUSTA PIZZA. All the signs were bright yellow with black writing so bold that looking at it felt jarring. The small crowd was boisterous. People waved the signs back and forth and up and down as they chanted, "Burton gone, Burton gone." Liam thought the chant was cheesy; but more than that, it was cruel.

What had gotten into everyone?

Liam couldn't believe it when he saw some of his sweet white-haired neighbors in the crowd. He spotted Mrs. Thompson, the short, round woman who was always baking Liam pies. He would never have thought she had a mean bone in her body. But there she was, shaking a fist toward the pizzeria as her husband, a usually placid guy whose most vigorous activity was the occasional game of croquet, swung his sign back and forth so vehemently that people had to jump out of the way. Beyond the Thompsons, Liam's old second-grade teacher, a sweet skinny lady who collected butterfly figurines and volunteered at the local animal shelter, held her sign high as she chanted so loudly her cartoony voice could be heard above everyone around her. And there were others. The town v familia them . But t the e

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was small enough that most of its residents were familiar to Liam. He wouldn't have imagined that any of them could have done what they were currently doing. But they were. Under the bright midafternoon sun, the easygoing townspeople had turned into righteous protestors radiating indignation and outrage.

Liam stopped polishing the old mahogany sideboard. He stepped over next to Mr. Burton and glared out at the protestors as he patted Mr. Burton on the shoulder.

"It will all blow over, Mr. B," Liam said. "You'll see."

Mr. Burton didn't look at Liam. The old man's gaze was locked on the protest signs. A muscle in Mr. Burton's jaw bulged. Liam didn't know what else to do, so he turned away and returned to his polishing.

Liam was asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow that night. Being around all the controversy all day had Liam wiped out. He was relieved to close his eyes and forget about everything.

But he wasn't able to forget, not even in his sleep.

Liam's alarm goes off early. It's a Saturday morning. He needs to get ready for work. Wiping his eyes, he shuffles to his closet to get a fresh white shirt. Liam ironed the shirt the night before. Mr. Burton insists on clean, pressed work shirts.

Opening the closet door, Liam's still half asleep as he reaches for the shirt. But as he pulls the shirt from the hanger, his eyes spring open. He cries out and stumbles backward. Mr. Burton is standing in Liam's closet, holding a whole pile of white shirts. The stack of shirts reaches right up to Mr. Burton's chin. Mr. Burton is beaming. His grin is wide and his eyes are even wider. In a trick of light from the closet's overhead bulb, Mr. Burton's blue eyes have faded to white. They shine in an otherworldly glow.

When Mr. Burton steps forward, Liam turns to run. He trips

Liam thrashed in his sheets. He sat up, sweat trickling over his shoes and flails. Liam thrashed in his shoulder blades. He looked down his back between his shoulder blades. He looked toward his closed closet door.

It was just a dream, he reassured himself. "More like a nightmare," he mumbled. He lay back "More like a mag a long time before he fell back to

The last place Drew wanted to go was home. Things The last place and his dad hadn't gotten any better, between him and his dad turned into torture between fill between had turned into torture sessions of and family dinners had turned into torture sessions of and family discoulding and judgment. Drew was sick of it. So he'd started the habit after the sun went down, when he could started the disappear sneak into his house, grab some leftovers, and disappear into his increasingly filthy room without being seen.

Today, Drew headed down Main Street. He wanted to see the growing protest outside Justa Pizza.

Four days in, the crowd was so massive that it spilled out into the street. Drew had to slow as he drove past.

A couple of the protesters spotted Drew and waved. One of them, Mrs. Pritchard, the hardware store owner's wife, called out, "Keep up the good work, Drew!" Mrs. Pritchard's eyes were lit up with excitement as she brandished her protest sign toward the pizzeria.

Several others in the crowd noticed Drew and called out his name. He grinned and waved back to the protestors. They cheered and waved their signs.

Drew drove on. Warmth rushed through his body as he found himself sitting up straighter behind the wheel. The attention felt amazing! He was like the town's hero. He was Ba Main Stre Drew t He pound the grung But de could on off. How how da with hi the top is, son, last dir

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He was Batman with a pen, swooping in and exposing creet's seedy underbelly.

Main Street's seedy underbelly. Drew turned on his radio as he headed to the gas station. Drew to the gas station.

He pounded his palm on his steering wheel, the power of

the grunge rock's beat coursing through his veins.

But despite the crowd's attention, despite his work, he could only afford a third of a tank of gas. That pissed him off. How dare his dad refuse to help his own son! And how dare his dad not see the value of what Drew did with his writing! His dad kept babbling about getting to the top of the corporate ladder. "That's where the money is, son, not in endless scribbling," his dad had said at the last dinner Drew had endured.

No, Drew thought, the money is in your accounts and in my trust fund, and you just won't let me have it.

Men like Drew's dad, like Mr. Burton, were the dregs of society. They acted all important and amiable, but under that friendly exterior, they were selfish monsters.

Drew went inside the gas station to pay. Pete, the twentysomething, prematurely balding clerk at the register, looked up and saw him.

"Drew! My man!" Pete leaned over the old wood counter crammed with candy, gum, and jerky. He held up a hand, palm outward. "Give me five!"

Drew stepped forward and slapped Pete's big palm with his own. Drew tried to breathe shallowly. Pete smelled a little sour. Not even the aroma of the hot dogs in the nearby food warmer could mask the odor.

"Rockin' article series you've been doing," Pete said as he accepted the twenty-dollar bill Drew handed him. "Everyone's talking about it. It's righteous stuff!"

"Thanks," Drew said.

A middle-aged couple came down one of the cramped aisles and approached the counter carrying a six-pack of root beer and two bags of chips. Pete motioned them over, "Hey, meet the guy who's been writing those articles,"

Pete said.

The woman, her graying brown hair tucked behind unusually tiny ears, looked toward Drew and flashed a big, yellow-toothed smile. "Oh, you're the one! Your articles are fascinating. I had no idea we had such a villain in our midst. I was just saying to Ralph—wasn't I, Ralph?—that we have an actual conspiracy in our town. That Mr. Burton is a villain for sure. I can't wait to read more!"

Ralph nodded. "Good stuff," he said to Drew.

Take that, Drew thought, images of his dad and Mr.

Burton filling his mind. His "scribblings" weren't a
waste of time after all! People were loving his articles.

They were getting into his accusations!

Everywhere Drew went, the reception was the same. Drew was becoming a local celebrity. And his fans wanted more.

So, he gave it to them.

"Who is Mr. Burton?" Drew's next headline read. He interviewed several people around town. "I think he lived in a bunch of other towns before he moved here. Not sure why he moved around so much," one guy said. "Bit of a loner." "But he's always nice when you speak to him."

"What is all that niceness hiding?" He dug up some psychologists' articles about how excessive cheerfulness or "niceness" often was a subterfuge hiding psychopathic personalities.

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That theme ran through Drew's next few articles, and by the time Drew was done with them, he was convinced by the by the duncovered a real monster hidden in his little town. If he'd had to tell the truth, Drew would have been forced to admit that he started his series on Mr. Burton primarily to punish the guy for being a stingy boss. But now, it was all for real. Mr. Burton was hiding something. Drew had unearthed true evil in the heart of his town. He was his town's white knight!

It was a gray, drizzly day when the junior class had its history fair, but that didn't put a damper on the event. The high school gym was packed with booths, and most of the town had turned out to wander past them. The gym was a chaos of presenting speakers and applauding observers. Several booths were using music or drums as a backdrop to their presentations. The rhythms and melodies clashed with one another.

Their presentation was a huge success. Unfortunately, as far as Liam was concerned. When their booth became the center of attention at the small fair, Liam wanted to sink down into the ground. And well before it all ended, he wanted to get away.

The problem, again, was Drew.

Liam thought that the material he'd gathered was interesting enough to make a good presentation. What he didn't think was that his notes could be reworked into something to further Drew's anti-Mr. Burton cause.

"Who can you really trust?" Drew asked an apt crowd clustered around their black-curtained booth as he completed a rather distorted summary of Liam's kelpie

research. "The kelpie legend is just one of many that warn us of the monsters that can lurk among us. Other warn us of the monser into animals abound. There's forms of shape-shifting into and the more comforms of shape-sintened Loki and the more commonly the legend of the werewolf. Therianthropy—the the legend of the werewolf. Therianthropy—the ability known tales of the werewolf into beasts—is known tales of the work to metamorphose into beasts—is a part of some humans to metamorphose into beasts—is a part of some humans to just the Gaelic one." Drew's eyes of many cultures, not just the Gaelic one Drew's eyes of many cultures, and gazed intently at the narrowed as he stepped forward and gazed intently at the growing crowd around their presentation booth. "Who's growing crowd to say that ability doesn't exist today, maybe even right here in our little town? What if someone in our town has here in our fitted that ability? Or even if they don't, what about the human monsters? The psychopaths who commit unspeakable crimes? What if a monster lives among us?"

The crowd clapped and hooted when Drew stopped speaking and nodded self-importantly. That was when Liam sidled away from their booth. For the next twenty minutes or so, Liam wandered through the gym and checked out everyone else's presentations. He ate some fry bread at a booth housing a presentation on Indigenous cuisine. Then he wandered over to his girlfriend's booth.

When Liam came up behind Shauna and wrapped his arms around her, she whirled around and smiled up at him. She tilted her cheek for a kiss, which he gave her.

"I see your booth is the place to be," Shauna said pointing to the still-growing crowd on the far side of the gym.

Liam shrugged.

"I saw some of the pictures you guys put up. Shapeshifters. Werewolves." Shauna shuddered. She leaned close to Liam, and he inhaled the scent of her jasmine perfume. "You know, I've always thought stuff like that was real. So do my par it but tries to Liam cou Shauna had "I think And really i Liam ga dropped an And he tangle of t Liam W He left th Liam • when he Drew's S up his t and it st the doc

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50 do my parents. Dad said the government knows about it but tries to cover it up so people won't panic."

Liam couldn't respond. He didn't know what to say. Shauna had never shared that belief before.

"I think what you and Drew are doing is really brave. And really important," Shauna said, squeezing Liam's hand.

Liam gave her a half-hearted smile. "Um, okay." He dropped another kiss on her cheek. "I've gotta go," he said.

And he did need to go. He couldn't deal with the tangle of thoughts that was clogging up his mind.

Liam waved to Shauna and strode away from her booth. He left the school's gym as inconspicuously as he could.

Liam didn't see Drew again until later that afternoon when he arrived at Justa Pizza, hoping he still had a job. Drew's SUV chugged into view just as Liam was locking up his bike chain. The SUV's engine sounded ragged, and it sputtered when Drew shut it off.

Drew threw open his door, jumped out, slammed the door, and kicked it. The kick added a new dent to the SUV's dirty white exterior. "Piece of crap!" Drew yelled at the vehicle. He spotted Liam. "Can you believe it? I just found out this heap has a cracked engine block! It's going to cost four thousand dollars to fix it! Four thousand! Where am I supposed to get that kind of money?"

Liam had no idea, so he didn't answer. He also didn't bother to mention that he'd suggested several times that Drew needed to put in more antifreeze as opposed to just adding water to his radiator. Instead, Liam asked the question that had been rattling around in his head ever since Drew had taken over their history presentation.

"What are you doing?" Liam asked.

Drew gave his SUV one last disgusted look, then

turned toward Liam. "Huh?" A crow swooped past, cawing loudly. Liam watched A crow swooped padde of the dumpster behind the the crow land on the edge of the dumpster behind the the crow land on the crow cocked its head and stared at the pizzeria. The crow cocked its head and stared at the

restaurant's back door.

Liam returned his attention to Drew. He walked over Liam returned its and planted himself in front of his friend. "What's your and planted himself in front of his friend. "What's your and planted himself in front of his friend." and planted minisch. And why were you talking about deal with Mr. Burton? And what we agreed to but deal with IVII. 2 That's not what we agreed to put in the "Oh, screw the presentation," Drew said. "Can you presentation."

believe we didn't even get a ribbon?"

"Color me shocked." Liam shook his head. The reactions of people like Shauna aside, Drew had turned the presentation into nonsense. Liam would be surprised if they passed their history class at this point. "That doesn't answer my question. What are you trying to accomplish with all the articles about Mr. Burton?"

"It's investigative journalism."

"It's lies. You made all that stuff up. I know you did. What do you have against Mr. Burton?"

Drew looked over Liam's shoulder and sneered at the pizzeria's back door. "I just hate it when someone pretends to be nice and then screws you over."

"How did Mr. B screw you over?" Liam asked.

Drew cocked his head and made an Are you for real? face. "You haven't noticed how stupid hard we've worked at this place for practically nothing?"

Liam shrugged. "That's the restaurant business. Hard work for minimum wage. It's like that everywhere."

"That doesn't make it right!" Drew shouted. He took

a breath and spok dad. He could fi new truck. He phone and get u "Leila? What Drew shrugg That's not the "What is th The pizzeri out carrying a He was smil-Drew. He sto "Oh, hello Liam step take that, M Mr. Burt

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a breath and spoke again in his normal tone. "It's like my dad. He could fix everything for me. He could get me a new truck. He could pay for my insurance and my cell phone and get us the limo that Leila wants."

"Leila? What happened to Zoey?"

Drew shrugged. "She said I'm too intense. Whatever.

That's not the point." "What is the point?" Liam asked.

The pizzeria's back door opened. Mr. Burton stepped out carrying a green plastic garbage bag filled to bulging. He was smiling and whistling until he saw Liam and Drew. He stopped whistling, and his smile sagged.

"Oh, hello, boys," Mr. Burton said.

Liam stepped over and reached for the bag. "Let me take that, Mr. B."

Mr. Burton evaded Liam's reach. "No, no, my boy. I've got it." Mr. Burton's gaze shifted to the crow, which still sat at the edge of the dumpster. He broadened his smile into a grin that was eerily out of place in the circumstances.

Liam stepped back and watched Mr. Burton fling the bag into the dumpster. Whatever was in the bag hit the nearly empty bin with a metallic thunk.

Mr. Burton nodded in what looked like satisfaction and turned to look at Liam and Drew. He wiped his hands together, then clasped them.

"Well, I suppose this is as good a time as any," Mr. Burton said. He cleared his throat. "I'm afraid I have some bad news."

Here it comes, Liam thought. The fact that Mr. Burton hadn't fired Drew yet was a testament to the old man's

good nature. Liam had figured that when Mr. Burton good nature. Liam as Drew's friend couldn't take it any longer, Liam as Drew's friend would be let go, too. And now was the time.

"Don't bother," Drew said. "You're going to fire us.

Liam whirled toward Drew. He turned back toward But don't. We quit." Mr. Burton. "I don't-" he began.

"I accept your resignation," Mr. Burton said. He shook his head. "And I'm so, so sorry about it."

"But I don't resign," Liam said. "I don't want to quit." Mr. Burton's nose wrinkled. He ran a gnarled hand

through his thinning hair. He shook his head again. "I wish I could keep you on, my boy," he said. "But without revenue . . ." He sighed. "Rob and Tracy have been with me the longest. For now, I'm going to try to keep them on. Maybe things will turn around. But . . ." He blinked, then stared hard at Drew.

Liam felt a cold frisson course through his body. The ferocity of Mr. Burton's stare was shocking.

Not that Liam blamed Mr. Burton for his animosity toward Drew. Drew was single-handedly destroying the poor man. If Liam was in Mr. Burton's shoes, he'd have done more than just give Drew a dirty look.

Mr. Burton blinked, and his usual benign expression returned. He gave Liam a regretful smile. "I'll have your final paychecks ready tomorrow. You can stop by and pick them up."

Mr. Burton adjusted his suspenders, gave the crow another glance, and then went back inside the pizzeria. Liam watched as the door, on a self-closing hinge, slapped shut. He shifted his gaze to the crow, which cocked its head and stared back.

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Liam shook off the unease that settled over him. He rotated to face Drew. "Are you happy now?" he barked

Drew shook his head. "You just don't get it, do you?"

Liam crossed his arms. "Get what? That you're a

jackass who's ruining an innocent man?"

"Innocent? Are you sure?" Drew grabbed Liam's arm and pulled him away from the restaurant's door. He lowered his voice to a near whisper. "I know I made some stuff up at first, but the stuff about Mr. Burton's past . . . that's all true. Before he came here, he kept moving around. Does that sound innocent to you?"

Liam didn't know how to answer that question, so he didn't. Instead, he unlocked his bike and rode away.

Liam sat down on the edge of his bed. He rubbed his face.

He could remember, vaguely, when sleep was one of the best parts of his day. Liam had always been a good sleeper. Once he was out, he was out for the night.

Shauna liked to talk about her dreams, and she was always asking Liam about his. "I don't dream," Liam told her. He slept so deeply that if he did dream, he didn't remember anything about it.

But that wasn't true anymore. Now, unfortunately, Liam remembered his dreams.

The night before, Liam had dreamed about being shoved into the pizza oven. Just before he woke up in a panic, into the pizza oven. Burton's grinning face looking through Liam saw Mr. Burton's grinning face looking through the closed oven door as Liam screamed and pounded on the glass.

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TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

Liam wasn't real keen on finding out what his dreams Liam wasn't rear keen ght. But he needed to sleep, had in store for him tonight, in his bed. He was and laid back in his bed. Liam sighed and laid back in his bed. He reached out

Liam sighed and land out of this bedside light. After just a few minutes,

A crow is cawing in Liam's bedroom. Liam can hear it, but he drifted off. he can't seem to find it. He looks all around the room. Where is he can't seem to jum in the crow? Liam cautiously approaches the closet. He doesn't want the crow? Liam cautiously afraid Mr. Burton will he doesn't want the crow? Liam cause he's afraid Mr. Burton will be there, but he pulls back the door anyway because he has to find the crow. he pulls back the closet. Liam exhales in relief. He looks

Mr. Burton isn't in the closet. Liam exhales in relief. He looks Mr. Burton ish. The crow caws again. It sounds like the crow is under the bed.

Liam crosses the room and kneels next to his bed. He bends

over and peers under the bed frame.

He spots them instantly . . . two glowing eyes. Liam opens his mouth to shout, and the glowing eyes swoop toward him. He hears the fluttering of a bird's wings, another caw. And Mr. Burton's face rushes toward Liam. Mr. Burton's lips are pulled back in a macabre grin.

Liam yells and scrambles away from the bed.

Liam fumbled for his bedside light.

"Keep it down in there!" his dad bellowed from down the hall.

Liam worked to steady his breathing. He looked at the floor and thought about checking under his bed. But he didn't move. He just sat in the glow of his lamp . . . for a very long time.

"Monster!" was Drew's next article. Liam was eating one of his favorite microwave dinners—country fried chicken and mashed potatoes—as he started the article. his dreams sleep. ached out minutes,

Where is sn't want here, but he crow. Ie looks

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By the end, in spite of the chicken's crispy crust and the potatoes' buttery aroma, he'd lost his appetite.

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potatoes' sarticle focused on a long string of missing presons—many of them children. The missing persons were in a handful of small towns in the state, and they were supposedly linked to a serial killer who had they were for decades and had yet to be caught. Drew been active for decades and had yet to be caught. Drew didn't come right out and accuse Mr. Burton of being the killer, but he claimed that Mr. Burton had lived in every town that had a missing person linked to the killer. "Only a monster could get away with such a long string of disappearances," Drew wrote. "And now the monster is here. Who will disappear next?"

Liam did his best to ignore Drew over the coming few days. That was pretty easy to do. At school, Drew was usually surrounded by kids now—and even some teachers—asking him questions about his article, wanting more "dirt" on Mr. Burton. After school, Liam was too busy to even think about Drew. He divided his time between applying for the few jobs available in town and scrounging up as many odd jobs as he could.

Ignoring Drew, though, got harder and harder. His celebrity grew even larger than the protesting throngs outside Justa Pizza. The only time Liam did speak with Drew, Drew couldn't stop talking about his new "status." "Investigative journalists are the backbone of our society," Drew told Liam. "They galvanize focus and aim it at society's ills."

All Liam could do was grunt and say he had someplace he had to be. Watching Drew strut around was sickening. It was clear that Drew was becoming addicted to all the

attention he was getting. As he fed the frenzy, the frenzy

And both frenzies were too much for Justa Pizza. And both frenzies

And both frenzies

A few days after the history fair, an OPEN ON FRIDAY

A few days after the history fair, an OPEN ON FRIDAY A few days after the sign appeared on Justa and saturday evenings only sign appeared on Justa Pizza's front door. Liam heard about the sign from Pizza's front door.

Shauna, who otherwise had been barely speaking to him.

Shauna, who otherwise had been barely speaking to him. Shauna, who outer ... Burton. She was on the They'd had a fight about Mr. Burton. She was on the They'd had a light the same and what a "horrible "Mr. Burton and what a "horrible " "Mr. Burton is obsessed with Mr. Burton and what a "horrible monster" obsessed with Mr. Burton and what a "horrible monster" obsessed with the he was, and she couldn't understand why Liam continued to stick up for "the beast."

"The only reason I'm not breaking up with you," Shauna had told Liam, "is that I want my prom night, You promised you'd take me. So, you have to."

No, I don't, Liam thought. But he didn't bother to say it. He couldn't think about Shauna and the prom. All he could think about was poor Mr. Burton.

"No one saw him put up the sign," Shauna said now. "Someone said he probably shape-shifted during the night and put it up when no one was looking. I don't know why he's bothering to stay open at all. Doesn't he know we don't want him here?"

Liam rolled his eyes and walked away from Shauna. The rest of the school day, he was antsy. He couldn't wait to get to the pizzeria to check on Mr. Burton.

When Liam got to the restaurant, however, Mr. Burton wasn't around. Or he was pretending not to be around.

Mr. Burton lived in an apartment above the pizzeria. You could get to the apartment from a staircase inside the building and from one outside. Liam climbed that one, a flight of w Burton's doo when the kn Nothing. Liam ste window no covered w between th Liam w time, on t If Lian door. Ur when he Liam exterior how for shaped was the

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a flight of weathered gray steps, and knocked on Mr. Burton's door. "Mr. B!" Liam called through the door when the knocking had no effect.

Nothing.

Liam stepped over and tried to peer through the window near the door. The window, however, was covered with thick drapes. Through the narrow crack between the drapes, all Liam could see was darkness.

Liam went down the stairs and knocked, for the third time, on the pizzeria's back door. He wriggled the knob.

If Liam hadn't been fired, he could have unlocked the door. Unfortunately, Mr. Burton had requested the key when he gave Liam his last paycheck.

Liam stepped back and stared at the burgundy exterior of the pizzeria. For the first time, he noticed how foreboding the color was. The building, although shaped like those around it, stuck out somehow, as if it was thrumming with an energy that set it apart. Did Mr. Burton have something to do with that?

Liam shook himself and snorted. He was being dumb. The building was just a building. He was letting all the monster talk get to him.

Liam sighed and got on his bike. Bumping down the potholed alley, he headed toward the back streets that would take him home. He was supposed to clean his neighbor's gutters in a half hour.

As Liam peddled past the dry cleaner's and hardware store, he thought about everything he'd heard lately. Shauna was just one of hundreds of people who wanted Mr. Burton to admit what he really was. The "Burton gone" chant had been replaced with "Reveal yourself."

New protest signs had been made; they read show YOUR

New protest signature of the spurred on that theme. "What TRUE FACE! Drew's latest article had spurred on that theme. "What Are You Hiding, Mr. Burton?" Drew had asked in his next headline. The article expanded on the missing pernext headline. The article expanded on the missing pernext headline. The article expanded on the missing pernext headline. The article expanded on the disappoint task force formed to sons cases and the law enforcement task force for enforcement task force for enforcement task force for enforcement task f

The next day, Liam had heard Mr. Schmidt, the ancient farmer who was famous for his preachy billboard messages, put up this appeal: WE MUST RID OUR TOWN OF ITS EVIL. The day after that, the town council had held a meeting to discuss how they could get Mr. Burton to leave.

Liam veered to avoid a kid on a tricycle, and he turned onto the road that would lead him back to the double-wide. Even more so than usual, Liam felt like he was living on a Hollywood film set. This couldn't be real. It seemed like everyone in town had turned against Mr. Burton. And why? Because a disgruntled jerk wrote a bunch of lies.

Liam wished he could have talked to Mr. Burton today. He had been planning to suggest that Mr. Burton sue Drew. "What he's writing is libel!" Liam had wanted to say.

Gravel crackled under the bike's tires as Liam turned into his driveway. He braked to a sudden stop. Spraying

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Orew had parked his SUV on the edge of the field and

Drew had parked He held a megaphone. The creating the held a megaphone is the creating the held a megaphone. Drew had parked in the held a megaphone. The crowd as stood on the hood. He held a megaphone. The crowd as

a whole was staring raptly at Drew. "Someone needs to confront him," Drew was saying "Someone liced now. "And since I'm the one who exposed him, I'm the

one who should do it!" The crowd cheered. Several people whistled and

howled.

Liam stared into the pack and tried to turn it back into familiar people instead of a single-minded throng. As he scanned the massive group, he spotted person after person he'd known for years. There was Mr. Crawford, the friendly old guy who ran the local grocery store. His bald head shone in the sun as he shook his fist and joined the cheers. Liam was shocked; he'd thought Mr. Burton and Mr. Crawford were friends.

And there was Olive Ferguson, the head of the local library. With the thick lenses of her tortoiseshell glasses making her eyes look huge on her face, she was beaming as she yelled, "Yes!" after everything Drew said.

"If our town is going to be safe, we have to eradicate its evil," Drew bawled.

"Yes!" cried Olive.

Someone else shouted, "Drive out the devil!"

Liam craned his neck and spotted the mayor's wife, a very caring woman who was always there when someone was in need. A faint sheen on her face glistened in the sun. Her smile was beatific.

Liam backed away from the throng near Drew's SUV. He put his back to the sound and color and motion, and he IOW YOUR

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gravel assaulted the trash can sitting next to the road; the sound of it was like machine-gun fire.

Liam blinked at what had stopped him. His mom's car was in the driveway.

She hadn't been home in two days. He'd thought she was gone for good.

But no. There was his mom, sitting on the front porch with his dad. Liam got off his bike and headed toward them. "Hey, Mom, Dad," he said brightly as if they were a regular family.

His mom was bent over a copy of the latest school paper. He could see the dark roots of her bleached-blonde hair.

"Did you see this?" his mom asked. "Drew says there's going to be a rally tomorrow to get Mr. Burton to leave town." His mom looked up. Her eyes were bright, and her cheeks were flushed. "You're going, aren't you, Liam?"

Am I the last rational person in this town? Liam asked himself as he brushed past his parents and went to his tiny room.

Liam threw his backpack on his small bed and sat down next to it. Everyone was falling for this trash!

Liam stood at the far edge of a pulsating crowd gathered on an overflow-athletics field near the school. The field was where the school held the occasional pep rally, picnic, or where the school held the occasional pep rally, picnic, or bonfire. Liam wasn't sure, but it looked like at least three-bonfire. Liam wasn't sure, but it looked like at least three-duarters of the town's population was congregated on the scruffy grass today. Men and women—old and young, scruffy grass today. Men and women—old and young, scruffy grass today. Men and women—old and young, and primed with rabid outrage. The townspeople's up, and primed with rabid outrage. The townspeople's wrath was spun into such a frenzy that Liam had trouble

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, S ran. He ran until he reached the trees surrounding the field. There, he leaned against the sturdy rough base of an old maple tree. He bent over and caught his breath.

Inhaling the scents of sun-saturated grass and thick musty loam, Liam clenched his fists and thought hard. He'd been thinking the town had lost its mind, but the protesters were all kind, reasonable people. What if they weren't crazy at all? What if the crazy one here was him? What if he was the only one who'd been fooled by Mr. Burton? Was that possible?

Now that he'd asked himself these questions, Liam had to have answers. And he knew how to get them.

Liam turned and raced away from the rally. He headed home and got on his computer.

An hour later, Liam didn't know what to believe. He still thought everyone else had gone off the deep end. However, a little doubt was starting to creep in.

He needed more information. Liam pulled his laptop closer and put his hands over the keys. Over the next twenty minutes, he composed a half-dozen emails. If he couldn't find the answers he wanted, maybe someone could help him get them.

In spite of his reluctance to go to sleep and risk having another nightmare, Liam was too tired to stay up after he sent the emails. He fell into bed fully clothed, and he was asleep before he even turned out his light.

Liam enters his bedroom and drops his backpack on the floor. He looks at the pack, thinking he should pull out his books and do his homework. But he's so tired.

Liam turns toward his bedroom door and pushes it closed. As the door swings shut, Mr. Burton steps out from behind the door.

His eyes preternaturally bright, like a predator's eyes seeking His eyes preternamen, Liam with a long, scathing look, its prey, Mr. Burton asks.

"What do you see, my boy?" Mr. Burton asks. Mhat do you see, my ... an impossibly wide grin. Retreating Mr. Burton gives Liam trips over the braided run

Mr. Burton gives

from Mr. Burton's leer, Liam trips over the braided rug covering

from Mr. Burton's leer, Liam trips over the braided rug covering from Mr. Burton's tell, the falls back, opening his mouth to his bedroom's warped floor. He falls back, opening his mouth to

Liam opened his eyes and shielded them from the brightness of his lamp. He looked toward his closed door. Nothing was there. He wiped his face with a trembling hand.

The next day, Liam stayed after school to talk to Drew. He wanted to discuss what he'd found. And what he hadn't.

Drew, as Liam knew he would be, was in the school newspaper's office. Surprisingly, he was alone.

"Where are all your acolytes?" Liam asked in a light tone as he strolled into the compact room crammed full of shelves, desks, and computers.

The room smelled like stale coffee and accumulated dust. Liam sneezed as he weaved around two small desks and two stacks of files and books. He perched next to a computer monitor on the desk across from Drew's.

Drew, his face screwed up in concentration, looked up. His gaze was unfocused for a couple seconds. Then his expression cleared. He sat back and pushed up his sleeves.

That's when Liam noticed Drew's forearms were bandaged. "What happened to you?" he asked.

Drew frowned in confusion. "What?"

Liam pointed at the big, white bandages and the

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smaller cuts that could be seen on the skin around them. "What did you do to yourself?"

prew looked down at his arms. He paled. Then he suddenly jumped up and raced to the office door. He closed it, locked it, and pulled the beige shade that hung over the door's window.

Liam raised an eyebrow as he watched. He crossed his arms and leaned away when Drew returned and sat on the desk next to him.

Drew leaned in too close. His breath was hot against Liam's neck.

"It was Mr. Burton," Drew said.

Liam leaned farther back. He looked at Drew out of the corner of his eye. "What was?"

Drew gestured at his wounds.

Liam jumped up. He faced Drew. "You're saying Mr. Burton did that?" he asked loudly.

"Shh," Drew glanced over his shoulder at the door.

Liam continued to stare at Drew. "I don't understand. Are you saying he attacked you?"

Drew hesitated, then he nodded.

"What did he do exactly?" Liam asked.

Drew ignored the question. He swallowed hard and paled, then motioned for Liam to come back and sit down again. Liam frowned but returned to the desk and sat next to Drew. He turned to look at his friend, but Drew didn't meet his gaze. He was staring at the floor. A vein throbbed visibly beneath his ear.

"This wasn't the first time he hurt me," Drew whispered.

"What?!"

Drew pulled his gaze from the floor. He turned to look Drew pulled his gaze to a what it's been like," he said at Liam. "You have no idea what it's been like," he said

"What are you talking about?" Liam asked. What are you talking and studied Liam for several Drew cocked his head and studied Liam for several Drew cocked his head getting antsy. "What?" Drew cocked his little getting antsy. "What?" Liam long seconds. Liam started getting antsy. "What?" Liam

long seconds.

Why are you looking at me like that?" linstead of speaking, Drew pulled up his shirtsleeve to

Instead of speakers. Liam frowned and started to scoot reveal his upper arms. Drew, but Drew grabbed Liam, reveal his upper and but Drew grabbed Liam's fore-back away from Drew, but Drew commanded arm. "Look at my arms," Drew commanded.

Liam jerked away from Drew. "What the ...?" He stopped when his gaze landed on Drew's left bicep.

A series of white scars zigzagged across Drew's upper

arm. Most of the scars were small, thin, and faint, but a few of them were thick and ropy. One ran from the inner side of Drew's elbow up in a serpentine pattern almost to Drew's shoulder.

Liam found himself reaching out to touch the long scar. He wasn't sure why . . . perhaps he was trying to reassure himself that he wasn't hallucinating. Was the scar real?

Liam's fingers settled on the scar's warm, lumpy tissue. It felt like a scabrous worm. He whipped his hand back. His fingertips were tingling. He could feel his pulse throbbing fast and hard.

"What happened?" Liam whispered.

"Mr. Burton," Drew said.

Liam shifted his gaze from the scars to Drew's face. "Mr. Burton did that?" He shook his head. No way, he thought.

"That's not all he did," Drew said. Suddenly, Drew reached for the hem of his shirt. In a rush, he pul! gasped and lea and gawked at The scars what Liam wa Drew's ches seemingly ir his upper ar scars. Drew hundreds. Liam fel his throat. And the Liam re upright. I white scaand over. It was al thought "Do what M Liam "Why Dre writin done : Dr was I

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The pulled the shirt up and over his head. Liam pulled and leaped to his feet. He took a stutter step back and gawked at Drew's arms and torso.

The pulled the shirt up and over his head. Liam pulled the pulled the shirt up and over his head. Liam pulled the pulled the shirt up and over his head. Liam pulled the pulled the shirt up and over his head. Liam pulled the pulled the shirt up and over his head. Liam pulled the pulled to his feet. He took a stutter step back and gawked at Drew's arms and torso.

The scars on Drew's upper arm were surprising, but the scars on Drew's upper arm was shocking... appalling. what Liam was looking at now was shocking... appalling. Drew's chest and stomach were crisscrossed by a prew's chest and stomach were similar to the ones on seemingly infinite number of scars similar to the ones on his upper arm. Long scars. Short scars. Thick scars. Thin his upper arm looked like he'd been sliced dozens... no, scars. Drew looked like he'd been sliced dozens... no, hundreds... of times.

Liam felt his stomach churn. Bile rose up the back of his throat.

And then it got worse. Drew turned around.

Liam reached out and clutched the desk to keep himself upright. Drew's back was a mangled mass of pink-and-white scars. It looked like he'd been flayed over and over and over. Hardly any of the skin on his back was normal. It was all ridged and etched. Liam's gut tightened at the thought of the pain Drew must have endured.

"Do you see now?" Drew asked softly. "Do you see what Mr. Burton's really like?"

Liam continued to stare at Drew's mutilated skin. "Why would Mr. Burton do that?" Liam asked.

Drew threw up his hands. "That's what I've been writing about! Because he's a monster!"

Liam kept shaking his head. "But why hasn't he ever done anything to me?"

Drew shrugged and pulled his shirt back on. Liam was relieved, but he could still see all the scars in his mind's eye.

"Who knows how he picks his victims?" Drew asked. He got up and started pacing back and forth. He could

only go two steps each way, so watching him made

Liam's head hurt.

"The thing is," Drew said as he paced, "I'm not sure "The thing is, both to cause a panic. Things how to tell people. I don't want to cause a panic. Things could escalate. People could get hurt."

"What are you talking about?" Liam tried to sound "What are you woice broke. The doubt he'd been nonchalant, but his voice broke the doubt he'd been nonchalant, but he'd done his research was growing entertaining since he'd done his research was growing into a knowing he didn't want to face.

Drew suddenly stopped pacing. He leaned down and Drew suddenty and looked hard into Liam's eyes. "You know, don't you? You get it now?"

Liam looked away. "What do I know?"

Drew grinned. And waited.

Liam took a deep breath and then exhaled loudly. "Okay. I admit it. I'm freaked. If Mr. Burton actually did that to you . . ."

Drew gestured at one of the fresh slashes on his left arm. "He did."

Liam took a deep breath and exhaled. "Okay. Yeah. I looked into it, and you're right. Mr. Burton has lived in all the towns people have disappeared from. And you're right. There is a manhunt for a serial killer, and at least one witness claimed to have seen an older man running from where the latest missing person was last seen. But-"

Drew barked out a laugh. "I told you!"

Liam frowned. "I'm not done investigating yet. I sent emails to some researchers. I thought I'd see what they could dig up. Maybe they can find something we didn't find."

Drew shook his head. Liam sighed. Yeah, what did it matter what the researchers found? If Mr. Burton had been hurtin looked prett "Why di Drew gr anyone. If? who would "How asked. Drew: Liam S settled or bandage Mr. I years? L "Lian Lian "Ha his eye Go that lo

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been hurting Drew all this time—some of the scars looked pretty old—the man's past wasn't really important.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about this?" Liam asked.

Drew grimaced. "Mr. Burton warned me not to tell anyone. If I did, he said he'd make my life miserable. And who would believe me? He'd say I made it up."

"How could you make up wounds like that?" Liam asked.

Drew shrugged.

Liam stared at one of Drew's bright red cuts. His gaze settled on the bloodstain he could see through the gauze bandage.

Mr. Burton did that? He'd been torturing Drew for years? Liam didn't want to believe it.

"Liam?" Drew said.

Liam lifted his gaze to meet Drew's.

"Haven't you seen that look that Mr. Burton gets in his eyes sometimes?" Drew asked.

Goose bumps rose up on Liam's arms. Yeah, he'd seen that look.

Liam thought back to all the strange things he'd seen in the previous few weeks. They were small things, but added together, they were significant: the way Mr. Burton's eyes had shone that day in the kitchen, the way his face had looked in the shadows, and the way Mr. Burton's gaze could harden, revealing darkness that his usual serene exterior hid. And how about the blood on his hands? What was that about? And then there was the fact that Mr. Burton locked himself into his office so often. What was he doing in there? That crow behind the restaurant was weird, too. The crow had disturbed Liam. It had looked so focused and intent when it stared

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at the restaurant, and Mr. Burton had gazed directly at the restaurant, and come out. And what was in at the restaurant, and win. Out. And what was in that the crow when he'd come out. And what was in that the crow when had thrown away? The restaurant distribution had thrown away? the crow when he d come was in that bag Mr. Burton had thrown away? The restaurant didn't bag Mr. Burton has lumpy as what had been in that bag Mr. Burton had the what had been in that plass generate trash as lumpy as what had been protective and Mr. Burton had generate trash as jump, had been protective of the tic bag. And Mr. Burton had been protective of the tic bag. And Mr. bag he hadn't let Liam take it. Why? What did Mr. bag he hadn't let Liam take it. Why? What did Mr. Burton toss out that day? And then there were Liam's Burton toss out the dreams ... what exactly was his subconscious trying to

Liam's dreams and his observations, Drew's injuries, tell him? and Liam's discoveries about Mr. Burton's past combined and Liam's discount of the couldn't ignore

the truth any longer.

Liam now believed that Mr. Burton was everything Drew had said he was. He really was a monster.

In spite of what had happened the previous day-and Drew hadn't been able to bring himself to talk about it yet-Drew had to go back to Justa Pizza. He really believed that it was up to him to get Mr. Burton out of town. He could just imagine the triumph if he pulled that off! He was already famous in his small town, but if he was able to get rid of the monster, his fame would spread. His journalism career would be launched just like that. That would show his dad!

Drew had tried to pull off this coup the previous day. And he had the wounds to show for it. Today, though, it would be different.

The sun was sinking toward the mountain range to the west of town when Drew parked his SUV at the end of the alley, away from the pizzeria. The SUV was still leaking oil, overheating repeatedly, and misfiring. Drew beyond the a new truc exclusive s. Trottin base of th looked up the dark Drew What ne He ha focused Drev mat and a car e nearby

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hated the thing. But once news of his heroism spread beyond the town, he'd have plenty of money. He'd buy beyond truck himself with the money he'd get for his

Trotting down the shadowed alley, Drew reached the exclusive story. base of the stairs leading to Mr. Burton's apartment. He looked up. A faint light shone through the crack between the dark drapes over the window.

Drew tiptoed up the steps. At the window, he paused. What next?

He hadn't exactly planned anything out. He had been focused on the end result, not the way to get to it.

Drew stood on Mr. Burton's black rubber WELCOME mat and pondered his next steps. At the end of the alley, a car engine revved. A happy shout shot out through a nearby open window. Beneath the shout, Drew could hear the sounds of a baseball game on a TV. Then he heard something else.

Drew heard the sound of an old man's voice. It was Mr. Burton's voice.

Drew took a stealthy step toward the window. He noticed Mr. Burton had duct-taped cardboard over the break in his window glass.

Drew pressed his ear to the window.

"I can't do this. I just can't," Mr. Burton was saying.

Drew pressed his head even harder to the glass.

"It goes against everything I believe," Mr. Burton said.

"It's wrong," he said.

Drew listened for a second voice. He couldn't hear one. Who was the old geezer talking to?

Drew listened for a few more moments, but all he heard after that were footsteps. When those footsteps

started coming toward the window, Drew took off, started coming toward and diving out of sight behind leaping down the stairway and diving out of sight behind the dumpster by the pizzeria's back door.

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about? What was he planning to do? Drew chewed on these questions for several minutes.

When he heard nothing else, he peeked around the edge When he heard led looked at the pizzeria's back door, of the dumpster. He looked at the pizzeria's back door, of the dumpster.

then reached into his pocket and pulled out a key. He gazed at it, mentally patting himself on the back; good gazed at it, include a copy of his employee's key before he gave it back to Mr. Burton.

Drew slowly rose from behind the dumpster. He looked up the stairs to the window. The drapes still covered it. He glanced around. He was alone.

Drew took a breath and darted to the pizzeria's back door. He let himself in.

An hour later, Drew was sitting cross-legged on his bed. His parents and his sister were sound asleep, which was good. Even though things had been getting a little better around the house, Drew preferred his own company to that of his family. Admittedly, his parents and sister had gotten caught up in the anti-Mr. Burton movement, and they at least credited Drew with the foresight to see what others hadn't been able to see, but Drew's parents still wouldn't budge on the subject of money, and Carly was still a pain in the butt.

Drew couldn't wait to see what his parents thought of the next article. Drew was about to blow the lid off the whole thing and reveal Mr. Burton to be the sniveling rat he truly was.

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Drew's hands were shaking as he opened his laptop. He still couldn't get over what he had found when he snuck into the pizzeria. It was incredible.

Drew had heard that in spite of staying open two evenings a week, in the hopes of getting the occasional tourist to stop in after the protest crowd went home at the end of the day, Mr. Burton's business had been practically nonexistent. The place was barely staying afloat. Drew was happy about that. It would help him get Mr. Burton out of town. At least, that was what he'd thought.

When Drew had snuck into Mr. Burton's office, however, he discovered Mr. Burton didn't plan to leave town. He had another strategy in mind. What he planned to do was commit insurance fraud. Drew found Mr. Burton's notes about his insurance policy on his desk.

The conclusion was obvious. Mr. Burton planned to burn down his pizzeria and collect the insurance money.

Drew stretched out his fingers over his keyboard and grinned widely. Validation rocked!

He hadn't really been sure that Mr. Burton was the serial killer the police were looking for. But even if he wasn't, Mr. Burton was, at the very least, a criminal. Maybe even a murderer. If Mr. Burton lit his place on fire, surrounding businesses would be affected, too. Poor Mrs. Tinker lived in the apartment above her dress shop next door to Justa Pizza. She could be killed in her sleep! When that happened, everyone—even the few holdouts who thought Drew's articles were slanderous—would realize he'd been right all along.

Drew leaned forward and started tapping on the keys. The first thing he wrote was the headline: "Mr. Burton, the arsonist and murderer."

Liam nodded

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Drew was so excited about dropping his bombshell that Drew was so excited the consequences. He didn't think through the consequences. He didn't he didn't think those when people read his piece realize what would happen when people read his piece until the afternoon after the article came out. That was when he drove down Main Street and found Justa Pizza when he drove as bigger crowd than Drew had ever seen surrounded by a bigger crowd than Drew had ever seen in his town. The mass of people was even larger than the multitude that had shown up at the rally. The mob surged against the front of the pizzeria and stretched up and down Main Street, encircling the parked cars and clogging both lanes of the road.

Drew spotted the chief of police and all five of his deputies huddled in front of the pizzeria's front door.

At first, the crowd and the police added to Drew's growing sense of vindication. But as he watched the chief pound on the pizzeria's door, Drew realized that if the crowd and the police kept Mr. Burton from burning down the building, there'd be little solid verification of Drew's story. Drew needed everyone to experience the full impact of what he'd discovered. He needed Mr. Burton to actually go through with his plan! If Mr. Burton didn't burn down his restaurant, Drew's ultimate triumph would be ruined.

Unable to get his SUV through the crowd, Drew reversed and backed down the street. He parked at the end of the block, ran to the alley, and raced to the rear of the pizzeria.

But he stopped just shy of the door. Liam stepped out from behind the dumpster. He held out a hand.

Drew caught his breath and glared at his friend. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you," Liam said calmly.

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"What

Drew frowned. "Why?"

"I know Mr. Burton has hurt you," Liam said, "but I was afraid you'd go too far and do something stupid."

"Mr. Burton has to be stopped!" Drew shook a fist. Liam nodded. "Do you hear that?"

From the front of the pizzeria, the crowd's roar crescendoed. Women screamed. Men bellowed curses. The horde's rage was a palpable thing that pressed around the pizzeria like a thick, clinging fog.

"You've done enough," Liam said. "They won't let him get away with anything else. You've stopped him."

Drew shook his head. "You don't get it."

"I do," Liam said. "You convinced me." He looked pointedly at the bandages on Drew's arm. "But Mr. Burton would never burn down his restaurant. You made that up so you'd rile up the crowd. And it worked. They're going to run him out of town. It's over."

Drew clenched his fists. "I didn't make that up! And it's not over. Not yet, it isn't."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to get in there."

Liam crossed his arms and shook his head.

"Get out of my way," Drew commanded.

Liam shook his head again.

Drew lost his patience. He didn't have time for this.

Drew reached out and shoved his friend with both hands. He put all his weight behind the thrust.

Liam lost his footing and staggered to the side. He reeled to catch himself, but his momentum got the best of him. He careened into the side of the dumpster and hit his head on the corner of it. He went down hard and lay still.

Drew looked down and frowned. He wished Liam hadn't made him do that. But Liam had given Drew no choice. Drew pulled out his key and opened the pizzeria's back door.

The altercation with Liam had stoked Drew's fury. He'd already soaked in the crowd's wrath. The physical violence had ratcheted up that energy, and Drew needed to let it rip. He planned to direct it at Mr. Burton.

As soon as he was inside the pizzeria, Drew started racing around, looking for the old man. He didn't have to look very hard. Mr. Burton was sitting at his desk in

his office.

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When Drew burst into the room even more stuffed with plants and antiques than the rest of the place, Mr. Burton didn't move at first. Mr. Burton was staring at his dark green desk blotter, his head in his liver-spotted hands.

Drew recoiled when Mr. Burton's gaze met his own. The old man looked so grizzled. The whites of the watery eyes were yellowed. His lips were stretched out, nearly bloodless.

"What are you doing here?" Mr. Burton asked.

Drew held out his arm and pointed at the jerk who deserved everything that was coming his way. "You're a monster," Drew said quietly.

Of course Drew didn't believe that, not literally. He knew he'd blown everything out of proportion. He knew he'd played fast and loose with the truth. But none of that mattered. It was time to wrap it all up and finish Mr. Burton once and for all.

"I'm done with just messing with you." Drew

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grinned. "Although, that's been fun. How did you like the decapitated rat I left for you? Who knew rats had that much blood in them, huh? I was watching when Liam caught you cleaning up." Drew laughed. "That was a riot. It totally scared him." Drew crossed his arms and cocked his head. "But now, I'm going to make sure everyone sees you for what you are."

Drew strode toward the desk and grabbed Mr. Burton by the elbow. He yanked the man from his chair. "You're coming with me," Drew said. Mr. Burton tried to resist, but Drew easily manhandled the man out of the office and pulled him toward the dining room.

Liam's head was pounding when he opened his eyes. He groaned and pressed a hand to the back of his head. His fingers came away wet.

"Bastard," Liam muttered as he struggled to his feet. Looking around, he spotted the pizzeria's open back door.

"Drew," Liam groaned. He staggered toward the door.

The inside of Justa Pizza was dark. Only the security lights threw out pockets of feeble illumination. The dimness made the dining room look like a dark jungle; the antique sideboards and hutches looked like predatory animals squatting in wait, preparing to pounce on the defenseless oak tables and upturned chairs.

Normally, when Justa Pizza was closed, the only sounds within its walls were the hum of the industrial refrigerators and Mr. Burton's habitual whistling. This evening, though, the pizzeria was bursting with the sound of the irate crowd screaming and chanting outside

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the picture window. The hollers and outcries were like "Monsters, auditory spears, drilling into Liam's brain. "Monsters, auditory spears, drilling into moment. The rhythmic no!" was the chorus at the moment did nothing to help reverberation of the escalating chant did nothing to help

his head pain.

Liam reached the end of the back hallway and looked toward the front of the restaurant. Through the big picture toward the front of the crowd pressing against the window, he could see the crowd pressing against the window, he could see the crowd pressing against the pizzeria. Several kids Liam knew from school were at the front of the crowd, noses against the glass, trying to see into the dining room.

The tightly packed bodies congregating near the window blocked out any fading light from outside. The crowd acted like a curtain, which contributed to the gloom inside.

A thud and a bang startled Liam. He turned just in time to see Mr. Burton, his bent legs churning, running out of the kitchen.

Liam started toward the old man. Before he got half a step, though, Drew emerged from the kitchen, too. He raced after Mr. Burton and caught the man's arm.

Mr. Burton tried to break Drew's grasp, but his strength was no match for Drew's. After a few seconds of writhing, the old man went limp.

Drew was carrying an open can of kerosene, and when the fight went out of Mr. Burton, Drew flung it. The can bounced off a couple upturned chairs and clattered to the tile floor. The liquid glugged inside the can, and then it sloshed out onto the floor. Its biting stench filled the room.

Drew pulled a lighter from his pocket. Mr. Burton reached out and clawed at the lighter with his free hand.

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Liam blinked to try to clear his suddenly blurry vision. The knock on his head was doing more than just giving The horrible headache. Liam had to hold on to the him a fight the vertigo that tried to take his legs out from under him. "Drew!" Liam cried.

Both Mr. Burton and Drew whipped their gazes toward Liam.

"I know I was running the numbers to see what an insurance payout would do for me," Mr. Burton said in a rush, "but I wasn't going to do it." The old man's eyes filled with tears. "I was just so desperate. But I couldn't go through with it. I'd never do anything to hurt anyone!"

Liam wasn't sure whether Mr. Burton was talking to him or to Drew. Either way, it didn't matter.

Drew redoubled his efforts to take control of the lighter. "Help me, Liam," Drew grunted.

Liam rubbed his eyes and tried to get his head to clear. "I don't understand." Liam pointed at Mr. Burton. "If he isn't going to go through with it, why-?"

"I'm going to make sure it burns!" Drew shouted. "That way, everyone will know how powerful I am!"

Liam took a step forward. The room started to spin around him. His stomach began to roil. Liam fought to keep it together. "What are you talking about?"

Drew finally gained control of the lighter. He held it up and grinned.

"You don't get it, do you?" Drew looked from Liam to Mr. Burton and back again. "I orchestrated this whole thing. I came up with the story. I created the narrative. It was all me."

Liam goggled at his friend. "What do you mean?"

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Drew toyed with the lighter. He chuckled. Then he

started to laugh. He pointed the lighter at Liam. "You fell for it. Like everyone else. You believed it all." Drew's grip on Mr. Burton tightened. He shook the old man. "Stupid old man. Thought you could boss us old man. Stupie I'd stand for it." Drew narrowed his eyes and sneered at Mr. Burton. "Well, I won't stand for it!" he bellowed.

Drew flicked the lighter. A clicking sound preceded the whoosh of a small flame that spurted upward and flared bright.

"Drew, don't!" Liam yelled.

Outside, someone shouted, "Fire!"

Instead of discouraging the crowd, the word fire galvanized it. The screams and yells crescendoed, and even more of the mass of bodies compressed against the picture window.

Mr. Burton started flailing in Drew's grasp. He flung his free arm and kicked out at Drew's legs. One kick landed hard on Drew's shin. Drew let go of Mr. Burton, and Mr. Burton fell backward into the nearest table. He got caught up in the upside-down chairs on the tabletop; he lost his balance and fell to the floor.

That's when Drew leaned over to light the spilled kerosene on the tile floor. The sound of a sizzling whomp filled the room as the lighter's small flame morphed into a giant flame, an angry behemoth of a flame that was obviously hungry for destruction.

A raucous cheer from outside joined the fire's ignition. The cheer seemed to fuel the fire, giving it power and lightning speed.

The angry flame spired upward, and it fanned out,

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racing through the room. The spread happened in an instant. One second, Mr. Burton's legs were kicking up into the air as he struggled to right himself. His glasses knocked askew on the tip of his nose, Mr. Burton's face flushed red with exertion as he looked toward Drew with fury in his wide-eyed gaze. The next second, the furious flames enveloped the old man.

Liam must have soaked Mr. Burton in kerosene because the fire literally obliterated him. The old man disappeared so thoroughly into the mass of orange-and-yellow flames that he appeared to instantaneously merge with the fire's seething undulation.

Mr. Burton's obliteration spurred the crowd into an even louder clamor. People started clapping and hooting. Liam could see people jumping up and down. Some were patting one another on the back.

The fire flared brighter and it expanded, shooting out sinewy, hot tentacles throughout the room. One of those tentacles whipped its way toward Drew. It ignited Drew's jeans and surged up his body.

Liam, numb with shock and still unsteady on his feet, couldn't do anything but stare as the fire unfurled itself up and out. It spread itself over Drew as if slathering him in flames.

The fire's consumption of Mr. Burton had been so fast and complete that the old man had never had a chance to react. He'd gone from a body to an integral part of the conflagration without making a single sound. Drew's immolation, however, was a slower process.

The flames wrapping themselves around Drew weren't as voracious as those that had annihilated Mr. Burton. These flames took their time, slithering and creeping

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### TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

over Drew's clothes and skin, as if tasting him before they dove in for the full meal.

ey dove in for the was hissing and wheezing its way toward Liam, he couldn't move. His gaze was held prisoner by the guttering tremors of the flames flicking their red-hot tips over Drew's skin.

No. Actually, it wasn't the flames that kept Liam's gaze

riveted on his friend. It was Drew himself. As the flames encased him, Drew didn't resist them. He

made no panicked attempt to run, no reasoned move to drop and roll. He just stood there. And he didn't cry out. Instead. as the fire licked its way up to his face, Drew laughed.

It was a laugh of triumph, Liam realized. Drew felt like he'd won. The fire was part of his victory dance.

Drew laughed and laughed and laughed.

His lips drawn back from his teeth, Drew laughed maniacally, lacing guffaws with keening screeches of glee. He laughed even as his skin began to crackle and glisten.

Through the squirming, ardent flames, Drew's skin turned slickly red. The entire surface of Drew's body began to pulse crimson, as if it was a slab of rare meat broiling on the grill. Pops and fizzes spurted out through the flame.

Liam's nostrils were assaulted by the worst stench he'd ever encountered. The odor was similar to that of barbecuing meat. Similar, but also different.

Liam remembered enough from his biology classes to know that Drew's muscle tissue was being consumed, and the barbecue smell came from that process. But a human wasn't a side of beef, and whereas meat from the butcher contained few veins, Drew's body was still awash with fresh blood. That was why Liam was inhaling a coppery, metallic scent. The heat was boiling Drew from the inside as it seared him from the outside.

Drew's hair was alight now, too. That blaze gave off a sulfurous smell that made Liam's eyes water.

Or maybe that was the smoke. The entire room was filling with black, oily fumes.

Still, Drew laughed.

And the crowd cheered.

Liam could barely process what he was seeing. It was as if Drew and the townspeople outside the pizzeria were locked in a feedback loop of infectious excitement. Drew's combustion was inciting the crowd, and the crowd's excitement was spurring on Drew. All this combined passion also seemed to be kindling the fire.

The flames suddenly stopped playing around. Instead of nibbling at the outside of Drew's body, they began devouring it.

Liam finally found the will to move.

Galloping toward the pizzeria's front door, he fumbled with the deadbolt and threw the door open. Flames chased him as he fell out into the waiting arms of the now-near-hysterical crowd.

As Liam staggered to stay upright, the entire crowd began backing away from the building. It had to. The pizzeria was fully alight. Anyone standing nearby would be burned as thoroughly as Mr. Burton and Drew were burned.

Drew.

Liam turned and looked through the picture window. To his astonishment, Drew remained upright. Still on fire, like a molten-hot mannequin throbbing, screaming-hot

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red, Drew now faced the window. Impossibly, he had red, Drew now have his head, and he curled his hands into fists of fire.

Although Drew was barely Drew now—the fire had overtaken him so that his body was just a scarlet imprint within the fire's flames—he still had enough consciousness left to spot Liam. Liam could see the whites of Drew's eyes as Drew aimed his gaze at his friend.

Liam was alone by the window now. The mob had regained its sanity, at least enough to back away from the building.

Consequently, Liam alone was the one who saw Drew shift his right hand to give Liam a charred thumbs-up. This gesture was his last act.

Liam could do nothing to help his friend. All he could do was watch in horror as Drew's body finally succumbed to the radiant heat that devoured it.

Drew's skin was literally melting off his body, revealing the slick, wormlike network of his tendons and veins as well as the stark white and now-blackening lengths of his bones. Drew's body pulled in on itself and dropped down into the flames. It disappeared in blinding orange flashes that whipped up and out, forcing Liam to back away from the building and join the rest of the people in the street.

Burgeoning fire and thick black smoke were now pouring out of the pizzeria. Liam and the people around him coughed and retreated even farther away.

Suddenly, someone shouted, "Look!"

Liam glanced around and saw an older woman pointing at the sky. Liam looked up.

Against the pinkish-gray of the nearly complete dusk,

the fire's smoke was billowing up and out. A breeze was catching it, breaking it up, then reforming it . . . into a shape that more than faintly resembled a horned demon.

A ripple of gasps and shouts coursed through the

crowd.

"Hallelujah!" someone shouted. "The monster's dead!"

Then everyone began talking at once. Some people started dancing in the street. Others hugged whoever was standing next to them. The mob unraveled and reconstituted itself into a block party.

In the distance, sirens sounded. As they got closer, Liam pushed through the crowd and strode as fast as his still-weak legs would carry him toward the alley where he'd left his bike.

Liam's house was quiet when he got home. His parents were probably with the revelers in the street in front of the bonfire that used to be Justa Pizza... and Mr. Burton and Drew.

As Liam reached his bedroom and began stripping off his smoke-filled clothes, his mind provided him with a Technicolor image of Drew's fire-beleaguered skin liquefying before it began to slough away from Drew's sinews and bones. Liam moaned as his stomach heaved. He quickly ran for the bathroom, where he emptied his stomach into the toilet before turning on the shower and ducking under its cleansing spray.

If only Liam could wash away what he'd seen. And smelled. And heard.

Every detail of what he'd experienced was etched into his very being. He doubted he'd ever be free of it.

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After his shower, Liam dressed in clean jeans and a crisp, white T-shirt. Something about the white cotton made him feel cleaner than any other color he could have chosen; maybe that was a residual of Mr. Burton's claim that white was the color of cleanliness. Liam shuddered at the thought of the old man.

After he took his smelly clothes out to the trash, Liam returned to his bedroom and threw himself on his precisely made twin bed. The scratchy seams of the old quilt his grandmother sewed for him when he was little chafed at his bare arms as he put his hands behind his head on the pillow.

Once again, Liam's brain replayed Drew's final moments. Liam wanted to force the vision from his head, but he couldn't stop himself from searching the images for his last glimpse of Drew's face.

He focused on the stark white of Drew's widened eyes and the equally bright white of Drew's exposed teeth. Liam remembered how skewed and contorted Drew's face had been right before he'd flicked the lighter.

It was unhinged, Liam realized. Drew had lost it entirely. But when? Had he been delirious before he'd started his campaign to ruin Mr. Burton or had his stories driven him over the edge?

Liam couldn't believe he'd fallen for Drew's lies. Drew had made up everything, even the stuff about how Mr. Burton hurt him. All his injuries really had been the result of stupid accidents, just as Liam had always thought. Drew had been careless on the job. He'd hurt himself; Mr. Burton had never done a thing.

But what about the serial killer stuff? What about Mr. Burton's past? Drew might have been making it all up,

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es h. 's but there really was a serial killer on the loose. Was it just coincidence that Mr. Burton moved around a lot?

Liam vaulted out of his bed and went to his small desk. He opened his laptop. Maybe if he concentrated on something, it would take his mind off what had happened.

Liam opened his computer to his home page, which displayed the most recent news headlines. "Serial killer caught at last," one headline read. Liam's chest tightened as he clicked on the article. Just two sentences in, he felt like he was going to be sick.

The police had caught the serial killer. The killer was an old guy, but not Mr. Burton. Liam rubbed his eyes and closed the article window. His eyes filled with tears as he thought about the sweet old guy who'd been such a great boss . . . before Drew ruined everything. "I'm so sorry, Mr. B," Liam whispered.

He sat in silence for a long time after that. Then he wiped his eyes and opened a new document on his laptop.

Liam never fancied himself a writer like Drew did. But he got good grades in English. He could write well enough.

"This is for you, Mr. B," Liam said as he started tapping keys.

Liam had never been officially on staff at the school paper (even though Drew often tried talking him into it), but he'd hung around his friend enough to know how to put out an edition. First thing the next morning, he went directly to the paper's office at school. There, he published a special edition that contained just his own long

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Life

### TALES FROM THE PIZZAPLEX

article about Mr. Burton. Then he went to class where, astoundingly, everything was business as usual.

Throughout the day, Liam waited for the outcry.

When would people start talking about the tragedy that had befallen the town? When would they grieve the loss of a kind man and lament the malice spread by a grudgeholding teen with too much influence?

"Nothing Drew said was true," Liam had written in his article. "The police caught the serial killer, and it wasn't Mr. Burton. Mr. Burton was no monster. He was a good man who tried to live a good life. If we're looking for monsters, I know where we can find them. Just look in the mirror. If you were part of the crowd that badgered Mr. Burton to his fiery end, then you'll find the monster looking back at you."

For reasons Liam would never understand, his article had no impact on the town. None at all.

No one cared. Not even Drew's latest girlfriend, Leila, who Liam saw sashaying down the hall at the end of the day after the fire, holding hands with Greg, the football team's quarterback. Leila's almost silver-blonde hair was a stark contrast to that of the girl walking next to her . . . Shauna. Shauna, who had sent Liam a "we're done" email the night before, was now paired up with the football team's star running back. Good. Let him pay for the dinner, the tux, the corsage, and the limo. Maybe Liam would be able to buy a car sooner rather than later.

But Liam knew that when he did buy his car, he'd think about Drew. He'd never forget Drew. Even if everyone else did.

Over the next few days, Liam realized that Drew's "status" had become nothing but a memory. In school and

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around town, Liam didn't hear Drew's name mentioned at all.

The fire department boarded up Justa Pizza. Someone started a rumor that a national franchise would take over the space. And everything went back to normal.

Life went on.